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Comic Books, Politics and Readers

The influence of the *2000AD* group of comics creators on the formation of Anglo-American comics culture

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Ben Little

School of Arts and Education

May 2010

MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY

EXAMINATION COPY

Ben Little

For Sam Luben, who never had the opportunities I did

Culture has never consisted of things – only of the particular pattern of relations established through the social use of things and techniques. Here again it is the general failure of the left to see and make contact with the popular and democratic elements in daily life because of the forms in which they are presently packaged or observed.

Stuart Hall 1983¹

Until fairly recently for most people “Can comics be art?” was not a stupid question. It wasn't a question at all.

Samuel R. Delaney 1999²

And now I say as passionately as I can: let us have as many of the things as we possibly can. In the face of the capital-calculating machine called Thatcherism which uses morality like murderers use shotguns, all the little things matter. Little by little, the cohorts of the 'competitive-minded' seek to shut down, enclose, militarise our imaginations. Comics prise open the bars just a little.

Martin Barker 1989³

¹ Stuart Hall *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left* (London, New York: Verso, 1988) p. 216-7

² Samuel R. Delany *Shorter Views: Queer thoughts and the politics of the paraliterary* (Hanover, London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999) p. 236

³ Martin Barker *Comics: Ideology, power and the critics* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, New York 1989) p. 301

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Abstract

This thesis accounts for the influence on the mainstream American comic book industry of a group of comics creators from the cult British science fiction magazine *2000AD* in the early 1980s. It details the way in which these creators developed new methods for approaching politics in comic books and delivering that to a more diverse group of readers as a response to censorship in Britain of the boys magazine *Action*.

The thesis looks at the way the medium's publishing history has interacted with the development of its modes of communication; in particular it explores how the reader in comics is positioned in relation to character and narrative development. To support this argument two chapters are devoted to the methodology and discussion of how the medium works. Comics consist of sequences of images that require reader input to produce a narrative. The chapters on form explore the implications this has for close analysis. These chapters use Hergé's iconic character Tintin and Grant Morrison and Chas Truog's surreal *Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina* as examples and draw upon and critique the theoretical work of Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen, among others.

The core of the thesis revolves around close analysis of eight texts, three from the UK and five from the USA. These are grouped into categories that broadly represent the different phases of the phenomenon. The first includes John Wagner, Alan Grant and Ian Gibson's *RoboHunter: Play It Again Sam*; Alan Moore and Ian Gibson's *The Ballad of Halo Jones* and Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*. These readings are then tested against roughly contemporary American published comics in the form of Chris Claremont and John Byrne's *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* and Frank Miller's *Daredevil*

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before looking at Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and John Totleben's *Saga of The Swamp Thing* as a direct transferral of values developed on *2000AD* to the American market. The thesis then moves on to consider how British creators influenced American comics moving forward by looking at an example that was clearly influenced by the movement in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* again using his earlier comic *Ronin* for comparison. Throughout the thesis these readings are used to show how these comics imagined new political configurations in response to the right-wing politics of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and attempted to do so while engaging a more diverse readership than was previously the case in either the British or American adventure comics mainstream.

The thesis as a whole advances comics studies in terms of contributing to theoretical work on how the medium communicates and by providing a detailed look at this period in the history of comics. It also contributes to a framework for future research in cultural studies to approach different aspects of the medium.⁴

⁴ *2000AD* eds. Pat Mills et al. (London: IPC/Fleetway, 1977-2000; Oxford: Rebellion, 2000- Present); Grant Morrison (w), Chas Truog (a) *Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina* (New York: DC Comics, 2003) Alan Grant and John Wagner (w), Ian Gibson (a) *RoboHunter: Play it Again Sam* (Oxford: Rebellion 2005); Alan Moore (w), Ian Gibson, (a) *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2005); Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a) *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1990); Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (a) *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006); Frank Miller *Daredevil Visionaries: Frank Miller Volume 2* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2001); Alan Moore (w), Steve Bissette and John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing: Love and Death* (New York: DC Comic, 1990). Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002); Miller, Frank *Ronin* (New York: DC Comics, 1987)

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Note: Comic Books, Comic Strips and Cartoons

This thesis is about comic books, specifically a selection of those published in the UK and the USA in the early 1980s. Comic books are publications ranging from between around 16 to around 64 pages and feature sequences of pictures (normally with words accompanying them) to tell a narrative or narratives. Sometimes these publications are collected into book format and described as trade paperbacks or graphic novels. What will not be discussed here is the shorter form, the comic strip, which is usually found in newspapers and features around 2-4 panels structured around a joke or gag, or constructing a serial. Nor will the thesis discuss editorial cartoons, single panel images to make a joke or point about current affairs, or animation. Patently all of these are related fields, they combine drawn images and language: nevertheless, the history of those forms from the 1930s onwards are for the most part separate from that of the comic book, and their influence on the specific period in question is difficult to identify and would be a different proposition from that explored by the study presented here.

Choice of texts and editions.

Although the format of the original publications of many of the comics listed here was in pamphlet form, for practical purposes, reprints have been used where available. This is in the same way that a student of literature would read a complete volume of a Thomas Hardy novel, instead of seeking out the locations where it was originally serialised. The exception is when a specific point is being made about the original mode of publication.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

This study addresses three issues at once. Firstly, it asserts the significance of a group of British comic creators who emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the development of comics as a commercial medium. These creators had, and continue to have, a discernible influence on the mainstream American comic book market. Their arrival in the USA was an important factor in the revitalisation of the medium on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1980s. The thesis argues that not only did British creators affect the cultural priorities and values of the US comics industry (albeit among other major changes at the time), but that their continued influence has led to a trans-Atlantic comics culture greater in sum than the comics of each nation taken individually. Second, the thesis approaches the texts it analyses as examples of a sophisticated media form and tries to theorise how each example draws in and maintains the interest of its readers. The study looks at the different techniques used in these texts as part of an historical evolution of form that cannot be seen as distinct from either contextual factors, or from changing ambitions for narrative content in the comics. Third, the thesis examines how comic books came to terms with the changes in British society beginning with Thatcher's ascension to head of the Conservative party in 1976, alongside those in the USA under Reagan from 1980 onwards.

The unifying argument of the thesis is that a specific strand in popular comic books of this period represented a new mode of response to the politics contemporary to the time of its production. This strand started approximately with the comics produced by the team

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on the IPC weekly anthology magazine *2000AD* in the UK and carried on in the work published by DC Comics in the USA in the early to mid 1980s.⁵ I argue that the response which the comics of the period offered was different from earlier political narratives in comics and cartooning because it focused less on the shock potential of the medium (for example in the EC horror comics of the 1950s, or “comix” in the 1960s and 1970s) and instead used fantastical settings to parallel contemporary concerns. This content was also not an *explicit* (party/personality/policy) political commentary in the way we expect from centuries of editorial cartooning. Instead, the texts analysed here express a political/social critique through an emphasis on comics as a narrative form.

The selection of texts that I have made for the purpose of this thesis traces publications that ostensibly decontextualise their narrative by transposing their concerns into the fantastic (which may be fantasy or science fiction, horror, superhero adventures or a blend of all the above). Through the use of alternate realities and (im)possible futures, these comics have produced a distinct field of political and social criticism that sits alongside and in amongst the otherwise conformist mainstream of the Marvel and DC publishing houses famous for their costumed superheroes that dominate the English language industry.⁶ What is more, many of the comics have proved their longevity and

⁵ *2000AD* ed. Pat Mills and various (London and Oxford: IPC and various, 1977- Present)

⁶ There were developments in the US as well. For example, Los Bros Hernandez launched their pioneering *Love and Rockets* at around the same time. For an in-depth analysis of Gilbert Hernandez's *Heartbreak Soup* and the way in which it politicises form see Charles Hatfield *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) chapter 3. However this thesis occupies a different position in the overall sphere of comics production than the study presented there, despite similar objectives and approaches to the comics. Part of this is due to the strong distinction between the “mainstream” and the “alternative” comics that the Hernandez Brothers were writing. Roger Sabin describes the distinction thus: '[The Mainstream] has dominated comics since the 1960s, and its readership can be characterised as largely male and aged between 8 and 28.... The readers of alternative comics do not necessarily read mainstream comics – in fact, there's very little crossover'. 'The Crisis in Modern American and British Comics, and the Possibilities of the Internet as a Solution.' in *Comics and Culture:*

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continued relevance in Anglo-American culture by remaining in print through collected editions. The authors and cartoonists have enjoyed long careers. This is perhaps testament at once to the quality of their creations and to their continued ability to critique the Thatcherite settlement under which political, social and economic life continues to this day.⁷

A key factor throughout the thesis concerns the question of how we can link a growing political awareness in the selected comics to the shift in the market away from texts aimed at children and male teenagers. The success of this initial change, which affected both form and content, can be seen to energise a distinct field of cultural production aimed at an older and mixed gender readership.⁸ In order to examine this, the

Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (eds.) (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000) p. 43

⁷ By the term the “Thatcherite Settlement” I am specifically referring to the consensus across political parties about the role of the state in the economy. This includes the rollback of nationalised corporations from heavy and light industry, pharmaceuticals, transport and communications to make way for the private sector and the profit impulse. At the time of writing, it seems that for the foreseeable future, health care and education will remain largely within the remit of the state (in the UK).

Thatcherism also encompasses the material and ethical changes that such a shift produced. That is, the outcome of a move from a society where the emphasis is on employment to a society where the economic emphasis is on ownership. In many ways this is a return (if not a regression) to 19th century liberalism and a move away from the social democracy of the post-WW2 years.

Under such a system, society values a person, not on what they are capable of doing or offer to others, but on what they can own, or are capable of owning. This is the “greed is good” mantra of Thatcherism, that places the organisation of social relations in the ephemeral hands of capital and reduces socially responsible behaviour to the profit motive.

This change in moral discourse was combined with a strengthening of the coercive machinery of the state to reinforce the authority of government for its own sake as an ideological principle and to ensure that those groups that opposed the economic realignment of society could be suppressed by it. Another aspect of Thatcherism was the rhetoric of a new social conservatism that went against the prevailing trends in society. So while Thatcherism was privileging the patriarchal, white, male money-earner in a nuclear family, the 1980s saw an increase in alternative family structures and a growing recognition of the right to lead “alternative” lifestyles. This also correlated with a growing awareness of race particularly following riots in the first half of the decade and the Scarman Report which followed.

See Andrew Gamble *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke, London: Macmillan 1994, 2nd ed) and Stuart Hall *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London, New York: Verso, 1988)

⁸ The distinction between form and content in comics is a slippery issue. The parameters of which cannot be easily defined, more on this in chapter 3.

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study will avoid a strictly chronological narrative, and instead focus on the techniques and themes that embody the arguments across a range of texts of the period. The primary mode of inquiry will be close analysis of the comics to see how they attempt to reconfigure the way in which they engage these new readers and how this informed their response to the shift in the political consensus with the advent of Thatcher-Reaganism.

Understanding 2000AD

As it is so central to the study, it will be useful to provide some more background on *2000AD* as a publication and how it came into being from the start. Significant is its immediate predecessor *Action*: this was the comic that broke from conservative convention; established a precedent for political content in comics for young people; sold spectacularly well before being forced to tone down by a “moral” campaign against it; and ultimately met its demise through a merger with the war magazine *Battle*.⁹ Martin Barker's book *Comics: Ideology, Power and The Critics* looks in detail at *Action* and I simply summarise some of his arguments here.

Action failed to survive *despite* its extraordinary success. Barker argues that: '[It] stood at the edge of a very radical politics – and that couldn't be allowed.'¹⁰ It ruffled the feathers of a status quo quick to suppress dissidence in whatever location it would be permitted to do so (the non-art status of comics making them an easy target). *Action* showed contemporary youth getting into scrapes with malevolent authority figures and generally, through various ups and downs, coming out on top. It put what would now be seen as “anti-social behaviour” in a context that made sense to the protagonist's life.

⁹ *Battle Picture Weekly* Pat Mills and John Wagner (founding eds.) (London: IPC Magazines 1975-1988)

¹⁰ Martin Barker *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic* (London, Titan Books: 1990) p. 49

Barker suggests that *Action* ran afoul of 'the renewal in the 1970s of the activities of moral pressure groups such as Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, and the Responsible Society... These two groups were the most vociferous, representing the kind of new moralism associated by many with the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher.'¹¹ *Action* was violent, subversive and more importantly, according to *2000AD* editor Steve MacManus, 'the first working class comic'.¹² The moral pressure groups backed by the right-wing press did not know what to make of it, and the calls for censorship were initially matched by a grudging respect for *Action's* commercial success.

This respect evaporated in what Barker identifies as the key moment in the campaign against the comic. In 'Look out for Lefty' the footballer protagonist's punk girlfriend Angie threw a coke bottle at a player from the terraces at a particularly inopportune moment in relation to current affairs:

This all happened at a time when football violence was once again hitting the news headlines, culminating in a riot at a "friendly" between Aston Villa and Glasgow Rangers. Seizing the opportunity, the critics went for the throat. The football league and leading officials were primed to complain: "World Cup referee Jack Taylor denounces comic!"¹³

Yet it was not that the comic showed football violence, it was a girl's involvement that caused the real controversy. Thatcherite social rhetoric and the rise of the moral pressure groups were about preserving the traditional role of the family in a changing society and part of this was what Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques describe as the: 'centrality of women's

¹¹ Ibid p. 7

¹² Ibid reproduced in Moose Harris *Action: The Seven Penny Nightmare* available at <http://www.sevenpennynightmare.co.uk/violentcomic/development.htm> accessed 27/01/09

¹³ Ibid p. 7

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domestic role'¹⁴. Obviously Angie, not only challenged this idea of the domestic role of women, she challenged the basic concepts of femininity that such an idea is founded on. Angie was as tough, as foul mouthed and ultimately as aggressive as any of the men in the strip and her relationship with Lefty (a left footed footballer, but there is an obvious pun there too) worked on a fairly equal basis. If any one character was the step too far for *Action* it was Angie and it would not be until Halo Jones and Judge Anderson in *2000AD* and Evey and Mystra Mistralis in *Warrior* that a female character with such vim would be back gracing the pages of British adventure comics.¹⁵

Angie was too much, too soon for an establishment that still saw boys' comics in the mode of the 1950s comic *Eagle* which had emphasised traditional Christian values and militaristic virtues.¹⁶ Angie is a profoundly political character and marks the movement in political terrain that was going on throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The historical framing of politics around questions of class that were so central to *Action*, was shifting towards to a new radicalism that embraced, as well as class, questions of gender, race and anti-authoritarianism. Although *Action* pre-dates Thatcher's election victory of 1979, it set the tone for comics that could address the new order with panache and humour.¹⁷

Action's collapse, however, paved the way for its influential successor. *2000AD* if anything was more political than its precursor – it crossed that line that *Action* could not and did so without attracting anywhere near the levels of criticism that its realistic

¹⁴Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques 'Introduction' in *The Politics of Thatcherism*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques. (London: Lawrence and Wishart in association with Marxism Today, 1983) p. 14

¹⁵ *Warrior* ed. Dez Skinn (London: Quality Communications, 1982-1985)

¹⁶ Interestingly Dan Dare, the main character in the *Eagle*, featured in *2000AD* yet was too conservative for the tone of the magazine and eventually dropped.

¹⁷ Many, including Hall and Jacques, see Thatcherism starting in Britain with Thatcher winning the Conservative leadership election in 1975, making the timing of publication here moot.

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counterpart had garnered.¹⁸ In all probability, the political vigour of *2000AD* was a direct response to the censorship of *Action*. When something is censored you bring it materially into the political sphere. As Gershon Legman describes it:

The censor's unequivocal 'You must not!' is seldom answered with an uncompromising 'I will!' Ashamed to oppose the censor's morality, and afraid to contravene his authority, the writer's first reaction is to evade the censorship, to see what can be sneaked through, what can be gotten away with, what can be disguised just enough to pass the censor but not so much as to escape the audience... [But] having buffooned to the end of the censorship tether – and it is short – the only recourse for both artist and audience is transvaluation, displacement, the siphoning off of the suppressible urge for expression elsewhere.¹⁹

In this way, *2000AD* was the response of British creators to the politicisation of their medium. They did this having learned their lessons the hard way. *2000AD*'s success rests upon its ability to manage issues of censorship, bring in an older and mixed gender readership and consistently question the authoritarianism and values of the new status-quo as it moved into the 1980s. There are four ways it managed this and I will deal with them in turn.

The first is that by shifting to a science fiction (SF) mode as a commercial response to SF's growing popularity in film, *2000AD* tapped into a long tradition of political literary writing. This is Legman's 'transvaluation' and 'displacement': the movement of political content into the fantastic to deprive the censors of a direct line of attack. It is also not something invented with *2000AD*. Within twentieth century science fiction we can identify

¹⁸ This is not to say *2000AD* did not attract any censorship or media criticism, *The Guardian* newspaper was initially particularly harsh in its view of the comic. Moreover having learnt lessons on *Action* the senior management were far more cautious about strips that could controversy. A famous example is strip featuring a war between McDonalds and Burger King that was dropped due to fears of a law suit. See David Bishop *Thrill- Power Overload : Thirty Years of 2000AD* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2008) p. 46

¹⁹ P. Gershon Legman *Love and Death, A Study in Censorship* (New York: Breaking Point, 1949) pp. 7-8 quoted in Barker op cit 1984 p. 75 extended extracts also found in Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester eds. *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) pp.112-121

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a clear chain of literary practice that leads from H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Yevgeny Zamyatin, through George Orwell, Phillip K. Dick, Ursula LeGuin, and into the 1980s up to the present with writers such as William Gibson and Neal Stephenson who all use SF to recontextualise political concerns. In the UK, it was with *2000AD* that politics, comics and the science fiction genre first merged consistently and approached the levels of sophistication found in the literary sphere. Science fiction is often associated with a fetishisation of technology, but I think this is a gross misrepresentation of the field. First and foremost it offers an opportunity to use the paradigm of the future to play out current concerns and possible teleologies of contemporary social practices. Adam Roberts, expressing a commonly held view of SF critics, scholars and writers argues: 'SF does not project us into the future: it relates to us stories about our present'.²⁰

Of course, this is not always strictly political; it is often philosophical, cultural or as the case may be scientific. But with *2000AD*, politics was always at the forefront of the writers' and artists' minds. In a recent interview for the BBC online magazine, writer Alan Grant makes this explicit:

Many of the stories we wrote were taken from the headlines of the newspapers. We just put a futuristic spin on them. There were genuine social problems, particularly from the Thatcher days. It was obvious to us that Britain and the whole world was turning into a right-wing society.²¹

How exactly this manifests itself in the comics, I will deal with through close analysis in individual chapters, but my argument is that science fiction was less offensive to the critics on the right who, with low levels of comics literacy could not see just how political they were, nor could they understand that the fantastical environments of *2000AD* were

²⁰ Adam Roberts *Science Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 35

²¹ Finlo Rohrer '30 Years of The Future' BBC News Magazine Feb 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6390731.stm> accessed 14 May 2007

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metaphors for the changing society of the 1980s.²² In a web interview Pat Mills, one of the key people behind the comic, explains:

On one level *2000AD* was almost a retreat, because I'd been so badly mauled on *Action*, it was like, ok, let's go into science fiction. We can say they're all robots, mutants and it's all in the future, so it doesn't actually matter and that's what we did...²³

What Mills seems to be suggesting is that from the creators' perspective, science fiction was secondary to the political content. It was a vehicle to avoid censorship rather than an end in itself.

The second innovation in *2000AD* was its mode of address. Barbara Wall's distinctions between single address (targeted specifically at one of either children or adults), double address (at children or adults at different times throughout the text) and dual address (at children and adults at the same time) are very useful to help make sense of this here.²⁴ One of the key changes in *2000AD*, one that had ramifications for comics on both sides of the Atlantic was its increasing adoption of the dual address mode. Unlike *Action* which despite its political awareness was very much focussed on its target demographic, *2000AD* started to engage in narratives that while internally logical to any ten-year-old reader would be peppered with references that make sense to a far more adult audience. From the birth of *Nemesis the Warlock* (a strip based around a song by the Jam), through the short stories of *Future Shocks* which ruptured notions of the alien, and whether our world really existed, and on to the relationship between unemployment and racism in

²² Ironically it then attracted criticism from the left most notably from the *Guardian* newspaper who expressed outrage at its simple "bad guys" portrayal of the Soviet Union. See Bishop op cit p. 30

²³ Alex Fitch and Duncan Nott 'I'm Ready For My Close Up Then....' (online) Resonance FM <http://podcasts.resonancefm.com/archives/620> date accessed 22/9/2007

²⁴ Barbara Wall *The Narrators Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991) p. 22 and following

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RoboHunter, dual address became the primary mode of the comic and gave the writers and artists a framework to explore increasingly complex issues in a style that did not alienate its younger readers.

The third factor in *2000AD*'s success was its ability to use the comics form to adapt the working class politics of *Action* to the changing class politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Stuart Hall sees this change through the disintegration of the left in the wake of Thatcher's phenomenal and unlikely success. Instead of a unified class based politics with its teleology in socialism, the rise of the New Right in the '70s and '80s and its apparent attractiveness to working class voters forced the left to instead consider: 'questions about moral conduct, about gender and sexuality, about race and ethnicity, about ecological and environmental issues, about cultural and national identity.' In this way, instead of politics being about seemingly unified ideologies competing for hegemony in the consciousness of the public, it became about alignments of specific issues in opposition to perceived injustice perpetrated by the state. Class conflict was no longer the central plank of a leftist politics: it became one issue among many, losing its central homogenising ideological position for the radical left.

This wider cultural shift can be seen in the movement in the politics from *Action* to *2000AD* and beyond into the comics British creators would go on to publish in the US. As we have seen, *Action* was firmly positioned by its writers and artists as a working class comic. This is a direct reflection of the politics of its conceptual founder Pat Mills. His work for *Battle* (the weekly war comic) and also in some cases in *2000AD* relied explicitly on a conflict between the working and middle classes. *Charley's War* reframed World War One as a conflict between middle class officers and working class foot soldiers being sent

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over the top to their death, a conflict he portrays as far more acute than the one between Britain and Germany (see figure 1). Likewise in his first *ABC Warriors* stories an identical conflict is played out except the foot soldiers are now robots and the officers fight through battlefield simulations rather than from a bunker, out of range of the artillery.²⁵

Yet Mills also pioneered the new style of politics found in *2000AD*. *Nemesis the Warlock* was his take on race, religion and cultural imperialism and *Slaine* tapped into the growing popularity of the New Age movement with its interest in Neo-Paganism and the ancient myth, religion and folklore of the British Isles (just as that movement was coming into direct conflict with the government).²⁶ However, Mill's work had an internal consistency that made for a good narrative but was often too certain of its moral compass to capture the mood of the times and which rarely embraced the fragmentary nature this politics was forced to adopt in its day-to-day contestations of Thatcherism.

The fourth method adopted by *2000AD* was humour. The comic was often satirical; it made extensive use of caricature and was prepared to laugh at itself, in large part through the fictional editor, the alien Tharg the Mighty. The combination of hammy dialogue with visual gags is reminiscent of the sort of comedy pioneered by Monty Python or the slapstick punk sensibilities of new British television shows such as *The Young Ones*. It tapped into the humorous stream in youth culture, inspired mainly by punk, which mocked itself, the establishment and the rest of popular culture in a way that might be described as subversively “tongue in cheek”. *2000AD* combined its comedy with moments of

²⁵ See Pat Mills (w), Mike McMahon et al (a) *ABC Warriors: The Meknificent Seven* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2004: 1979) e.g p. 14

²⁶ An excellent essay on how and why the New Age movement was targeted by Thatcher as it represented and alternative economy is Jim Carey ‘A Criminal Culture?’ [www.dreamflesh.com](http://dreamflesh.com/essays/crimculture/) available at: <http://dreamflesh.com/essays/crimculture/> accessed 4 May 2010

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poignancy, both political and emotional, that stop it from often sliding into pure farce.

While *DR and Quinch* was a mockery of the emerging teen film with added weapons of mass destruction, strips like *Rogue Trooper* maintained a consistently sombre tone.²⁷

If the four ways I have identified *2000AD*'s divergence from earlier comics were largely responsible for its success, it is also fair to mention that side effects of Thatcherism going on outside of comics helped to an extent as well. As markets and choice became the key words in economic life, censorship and government intervention in a commercial activity such as publishing were increasingly frowned upon. This exposed the paradoxes that sat at the very heart of Thatcher's alliance between economic liberals and social conservatives. While this is not of central interest to the close analysis in this thesis, the changing role of the media is something that was a focus of attention for many comics creators and in some ways comics benefitted from the ideology of consumerism even as some critiqued it.

²⁷ The strip that became most famous for combining all of these elements is 'Judge Dredd' and while it will not be looked at in depth here, Dredd became the iconic character associated with *2000AD*. In 1983, even as the creators from the magazine made it to the US, Dredd was making the journey across the Atlantic in the form of reprints (Roger Sabin *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London, New York: Phaidon, 1996) p. 162). However, while the strip embraced all four aspects of the *2000AD* formula, I am suspicious of how "legible" the politics supposedly embedded in his narrative are. Sabin points out that in the US 'the humour tended to be missed' and quoting writer Alan Grant the Judge was seen as a "'shoot-em-up fascist'". (Roger Sabin *Adult Comics: An introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993) pp. 175-176) I think the same comments would probably be true for the UK as well. As a character who is judge, jury and executioner, Dredd remains firmly the hero of every piece and while left-wing readings are available if the humorous tone of the strips are accounted for; right-wing readings are equally as available as the comic is rarely purely satirical. In fact, Dredd, at times, becomes a straightforward Thatcherite power fantasy. For this reason to tackle 'Judge Dredd' in the same level of detail as the other comics looked at in this chapter would require a large tangential distraction from the main argument. Some of the issues that arise in the possibility of Thatcherite readings of *2000AD* will be tackled in my analysis of 'Play it Again Sam', but Dredd would need to be addressed independently and will be something I will return to post-thesis.

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Censorship in the 1950s

The story of British and American comics into the 1980s is intimately tied to the success of censorship campaigns in the 1950s. To contextualise how and why comics changed in the early 1980s, it is necessary to understand what they were changing from and the factors that came together to enable that change. Interestingly, it was censorship and prohibition that provoked the innovations, rather than a radical, free, creative space. The censorship campaigns in the US were concentrated in the 1940s and 1950s and were largely successful. They were paralleled by a similar campaign in the UK that targeted American comics specifically. The result of this was a thirty-year interruption in the integration of the two comics traditions.

Censorship is perhaps one of the most considered areas of comics scholarship: Martin Barker's book *A Haunt of Fears*, provides a solid and meticulously researched basis for the British campaign; Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* deals in detail with the American campaign, and Amy Kiste Nyberg's excellent *Seal of Approval: The History of The Comics Code* focuses on the emergence of the industry's self-censorship regime, the Comics Code itself.²⁸ I do not mean to repeat their work here, but I rely on their research to make the argument in the thesis about what the change was that the British creators in their move to the US were catalysing. What we can see from the comics themselves is the effect of the American campaign and how restrictions in content led to a concurrent limitation of formal

²⁸ Martin Barker *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London, New South Wales: Pluto Press, 1984); Bradford W. Wright *Comic Book Nation: The transformation of youth culture in America* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins UP, 2001); Amy Kiste Nyberg *Seal of Approval: The history of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); See also Bart Beaty *Frederic Wertham and The Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005)

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innovation. This scenario persisted until the 1970s, but it took the injection of British ideas to cement the shift away from the censorship regime of the Comics Code and to move American comics in a new direction.

Bradford Wright's history provides a detailed analysis of how the campaign in the US affected the comics being produced, even stultified their development as a medium. Yet Wright fails to draw out all the implications of his analysis, stating bluntly: 'I believe there are intellectual pitfalls in analyzing something like comic books too deeply'.²⁹ To an extent Barker takes the opposite approach when considering British comics: '[the] "refusal to theorise" must be our first target'³⁰. His argument is that it is precisely this lack of analysis that meant a great disservice was done to the comics themselves. In Barker's view the absence of critical rigour on the part of the opponents of the comics meant that 'the [British] campaign against the comics was not *about* the comics, but about a conception of society, children and Britain.'³¹ Comics became a cultural site around which social anxieties were played out ideologically, displacing the texts themselves. This may be an accurate description of the campaigns; but their effect on the development of the medium, led to a very different outcome. The campaigns affected how texts were published and perceived; what sort of content they contained; even how they were drawn. The cultural attitudes that coalesced around comics, attitudes then enshrined in law, would demonstrate their longevity in the UK in the controversy over IPC's *Action* comic in the late 1970s and they would be repeated later with the reaction to Savoy Publishing's *Meng and Ecker* in the late

²⁹Bradford W. Wright *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins UP, 2001) p. xviii

³⁰ Barker 1984 op cit p.187

³¹Ibid p. 6 emphasis Barker

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1980s and early 1990s.³²

Crucial to the debate around comics was the assumption that comics should be a “child safe” medium. This was an idea constructed through ideologies around literature, around class and around childhood and was deeply ingrained in both the public consciousness and publishers' editorial decisions. It was by transcending these views and playing within what was permissible, but without breaking their rules, that British creators on *2000AD* started the movement that would have a significant effect on the medium as a whole.

The campaigns also occurred at a time when comics were under pressure from the increased presence of televisions in more and more family homes. Comics' competed in the entertainment market by being cheap, quicker to read than novels and more easily accessible to children than film or theatre. They co-existed alongside radio for most of the period from the 1930s onwards. Radio offered a different experience as it lacked the visual element to directly compete with comics as a similar type of leisure activity. However, Marshall McLuhan argues that television by the mid 1950s ‘was beginning to eliminate the comic book by direct rivalry’.³³

The outcome was that mainstream comics became a toothless shadow of their former selves. From the mid 1950s onwards, any subversive or obviously anti-establishment tendencies were ironed out. However, censorship forced some creators, who had more political or avant-garde ambitions for the medium, into an unedited underground largely free from commercial considerations. Yet the two sides of the industry remained

³² *Action* ed. Pat Mills, John Sanders (IPC: Feb 1976-Nov 1977) and Dave Britton (w), Kris Guido (a) *Meng and Ecker* (Manchester: Savoy, 1989-1994)

³³ Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge: 2001: 1964) p. 180-181

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loosely intertwined. The underground parodied the mainstream, as much as writers and artists in the mainstream adapted the formal experimentation pioneered by the undergrounds.

Nevertheless the economic bases of the two were entirely antithetical: the mainstream mostly used factory line production with specialist writers, pencillers, inkers and colourists to put out monthly (weekly in the UK) comics; the underground produced pamphlets irregularly with individual strips tending to be produced by one person. The mainstream was commercially driven: a business almost paradigmatic of the mass media, with sales figures the primary relevant factor in the success or failure of a title. Conversely, the underground was an anarchistic field run on creators' whim and political conviction. The medium developed in two separate enclaves that publicly barely recognised the existence of the other, but continued to interact on an aesthetic level, no matter how hidden. Inevitably there are nuances, exceptions, and borderline texts that do not fit into this division between a muzzled mainstream and a taboo-breaking underground.³⁴ In this crude, but historically accurate, opposition we can discern the unique potential of the medium and the trajectory of its aesthetic and political development leading up to the 1980s where the arrival of British comics creators would be one of the factors paving the way for increased crossover between the two strands.

That said, the catalyst of the censorship of *Action* and the emergence of *2000AD*, which initiated the movement of central interest in this thesis, was a very different phenomenon to what happened in the 1940s and 1950s. The campaign against *Action* was

³⁴ *Mad Magazine* and the comics and cartoons found in *Playboy* might be one location to look more closely at for this. However while significant, analysis of these magazines would distract from the primary narrative here.

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against only one comic, it did not spread to the industry as a whole. As a result it forced not a change in the entire industry, but made demands of a specific group of creators who were working very definitely within the commercial remit of the IPC/Fleetway magazine conglomerate. Thus unlike in the 1950s a niche response emerged rather than an industry-wide capitulation and it was that niche response that proved to be transformative of the political content and mode of addressing readers in a large section of the commercial publishing industry.

Comics and the Anglo-American Cultural Area

The comics industry into which British creators entered in the move to the USA was dynamic and changing. New people talent was emerging and developing in the mainstream market, while a whole new area for the medium had opened up through specialist shops and the direct market. The influence of other comics traditions from other countries, notably France and Japan, was starting to become evident in mainstream newsstand comics. The arrival of a politicised group of British creators in the American comics industry was significant in terms of comics, but it took place in a time of increasing convergence in British and American popular culture.

The Anglo-American comics of the early-mid 1980s represent a fertile exchange of ideas, techniques and approaches that goes beyond a simple notion of national influence.

Richard Pells argues that the process of cultural intermingling between Europe and

America is not simple:

The relationship between Europe and the United States in the last half of the twentieth century has not been as one-sided as European politicians and intellectuals have usually charged. Americans are as affected by European products and fashions as Europeans are influenced by American technology and mass entertainment. The

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result is a complex interaction between different and increasingly heterogeneous cultures and societies.³⁵

The British-American relationship, however, is closer than that between the US and the rest of Europe. While this can initially be attributed to a shared language and colonial history, it grew even closer with the political convergence that occurred during the 1980s under the stewardships of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Richard Dumbrell argues that the personal and political closeness between the two: 'was intense, and unprecedented in recent history.'³⁶ He goes further, to argue that by the middle of the decade: 'by some measures the US and Britain ... seem[ed] to constitute a distinct "culture area".'³⁷

The "discovery" of British comics creators in the US represents a similar phenomenon to the affect that British artists had on American pop-music in the 1960s following the success of the Beatles, both in terms of their popular appeal and their comparative radicalism.³⁸ To demonstrate the scale of this parallel we can make a short list of some of the British talent who were working with American publishers by 1995: John Wagner, Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, Alan Grant, Eddie Campbell, Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis, Garth Ennis, Steve Dillon, Neil Gaiman, Dave McKean, Kevin O'Neill, Bryan Talbot, Ian Gibson, Brian Bolland and many more. However, in the same way as the

³⁵ Richard Pells *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) p. xv

³⁶ John Dumbrell *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (London, New York: MacMillan, 2001) p. 89

³⁷ Ibid. p. 32

³⁸ As Richard Pells argues:

The Beatles managed to be avant-garde and commercial at the same time. After their spectacular tour of the United States in 1964, the directors of America's record companies realized that Britain was a hotbed of musical innovation. Producers signed any British group they could find to a recording contract. American radio programs featured the latest British music. American singer-composers like Simon and Garfunkel tried to emulate the artistry of the Beatles. Soon, American and British groups sounded indistinguishable. By the 1970s, a transatlantic style had emerged, combining elements of British and American popular music. Pells op cit p. 319

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British music scene of the 1960s developed out of exposure to, and reinterpretation of, American popular music, so the changes that occurred in comics in the 1980s cannot be seen as a simple case of one group of creators influencing another. British comics had changed in the late 1940s and early 1950s inspired by an influx of American publications imported for GIs stationed in the UK.³⁹ The British creators involved in *2000AD* had been influenced by both the American mainstream and underground US artists such as Robert Crumb, Jaxon and Gilbert Shelton. Many of the *2000AD* writers and artists had been involved in the British underground comics scene largely inspired by its American counterpart.⁴⁰ Over time, the process had been one of reciprocal influence and innovation, so that by the mid-late 1980s we could talk of the emergence of a transatlantic Anglophone comics culture. One common euphemism for this convergence has been references to the “darkening” of the comics industry: the tone of many comics became more cynical, and favourite characters became more sinister. It was not simply stylistic however, that visible shift was a consequence of creators taking their readership more seriously and responding to the significant political and social changes occurring on both sides of the ocean.

Previously American comics were imported to Britain or reprinted in special British editions (for instance, under the auspices of Marvel UK – which also produced original

³⁹ See George H. Pumphrey *Children's Comics: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (London: The Epworth Press, 1955) pp. 12-13:

Since 1950 the old-established comics have been joined by many new ones. Undoubtedly the most interesting newcomers are those produced by Hulton Press – *Eagle*, *Girl*, *Robin* and *Swift*. These comics were planned by Marcus Morris, a clergyman, who although new to the business, induced the Hulton Press (also new to comics publishing) to produce *Eagle*.

These new comics have been enormously successful. They are interesting because they use a technique new to British comics. It is the technique of the American comic, which makes the picture tell the story. Captions are reduced to a minimum and are placed in balloons which emerge from the characters mouths. The traditional British comic has captions under the pictures and some balloons.

The new technique integrates the pictures, making the story develop from frame to frame.

⁴⁰ See Roger Sabin *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 55

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material) without a corresponding export of UK comics back to the US. In the 1930s through the 1950s, many of the comics had travelled as ballast in the holds of ships. Consequently, the importance of the work done in the UK prior to the emergence of this joint culture was largely ignored, or understood in terms of a lone “genius” such as Alan Moore, or considered irrelevant in contemporary comics scholarship.⁴¹ Even in 2006, a wikipedia entry on Moore reads that prior to his work on *Swamp Thing*: ‘Moore, then relatively unknown, had at that time *only* written several stories for *2000AD*, *Warrior* and *Marvel UK*.’⁴² His writing for the UK market is dismissed as minor.

The narrow nationalism of American comics history and the relative (although rapidly improving) ignorance of US scholars to European comics, and specifically the British comics tradition, can be seen in overstatements of the relative difference between the two sides of the Atlantic. Usually, generalisations are made that Europeans have a universally adult comics culture far greater in scope than that of the US. An example of this is Greg McCue's interview with Tom DeFalco (editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics 1987-1994) found in McCue's book *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context*. This extract is a response to McCue's enquiry as to whether the “renaissance” in 1980s comic books represented a permanent shift in the output of the medium:

DeFalco: ...When I was giving you my bullshit history of comics, I neglected to mention that, in Europe, they never had the McCarthy era that we had. They never had that 1950s era. Consequently, their publications never twisted toward just the children's medium. Consequently they have a whole adult comic-book industry over there and there are regular monthly and weekly comic books, for adults. When I say adult comics, I'm not saying more violent, more sexy. I define adult as sophistication

⁴¹ The exception here is Sabin 1993 op cit which takes a slightly different view to mine. I will discuss this later in this section.

⁴² ‘Alan Moore’ (online) *Wikipedia Website* available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swamp_Thing#Alan_Moore accessed 14/9/06 (emphasis mine).

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of ideas, and in that respect they have much more adult material.

McCue: You mean Moebius or *2000AD* [sic].*

DeFalco: Yeah. They don't have a big superhero industry in Europe because, since their natural evolution was not distorted, they eventually grew out of superheroes and they have their regular stories, about detectives and newspaper reporters and all that other stuff.

*British Comic Books -Ed. [sic.]⁴³

There are numerous problems with this exchange. DeFalco's definition of adult comics is an attempt to put a spin on the term that would be more acceptable to conservatives. Yet it *is* sexual and violent content (although not necessarily of a pornographic variety) that often marks something out as specifically for adults. For example, the French science fiction tradition as implied by McCue's referencing of the artist Moebius (the pseudonym of French comic creator Jean Girard – definitely not a British comic book) is sophisticated, but also commonly has violent and sexual content.⁴⁴ Noting *2000AD* as a long-standing example of an adult comic ignores the fact that it was only founded in 1977 and was initially aimed at young people in the traditional “boys paper” mould. It did go on to embody the more adult themes DeFalco refers to (and to cross the gender divide), but in that sense it was one of the first of its kind, not part of a long tradition of comic books pre-dating the 1950s or as a response to a saturation of superhero comics (which were mainly US imports in Britain anyway, not a native art-form that the British “grew out of”). Moreover, as we have seen *2000AD* continued to be appropriate for younger audiences despite its mature themes.

Significantly, *2000AD* was the publication that launched the mainstream careers of

⁴³ Greg McCue with Clive Bloom *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context* (London, Boulder CO: Pluto Press, 1993) p. 94

⁴⁴ See for instance Alexandro Jodorowsky (w), Moebius (a) Sasha Watson and Justin Kelly (trans.) *The Incal: The Epic Conspiracy* (Hollywood CA: Humanoids, 2005)

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the British comics creators who would work in the US and contribute to the transformation the two are discussing. And yet after making this point about the more adult, sophisticated nature of European comics and specifically British ones, DeFalco then suggests that Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* broke no new ground in the US.⁴⁵ He suggests that they just did what everyone else had been doing only better, 'and that is what Stan Lee [of Marvel Comics] did [in the 1960s]... he had a "revolutionary" idea that the characters should be more real'. So, on the one hand, when these creators work in Britain, they are working to a higher standard that the US comics industry should emulate, yet when they work in the US they are merely copying traditional themes and techniques from within the American genre. DeFalco's views could be explained in part by the fact that *Watchmen* was published by Marvel's direct rival DC, or equally by the fact that he was not familiar with *2000AD* and was covering up this lack of knowledge, or possibly he might not have been aware that both Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons had worked on the magazine.

On censorship, DeFalco's belief that Europe escaped the sorts of censorship that the US experienced, is even more contentious. His argument is that unlike their European equivalents, American comics publishing had to struggle against an entrenched view of what the comics industry should be: Europeans were blessed with an enlightened public more amenable to complex themes appearing in their comic books. Yet despite the restraints imposed, DeFalco argues that the American industry has steadily progressed in its sophistication and "realism" since the 1960s, having been blighted by the censors in the

⁴⁵ Alan Moore (w), Dave Gibbons (a) *Watchmen* (London: Titan, 1987). This comic, along with Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize winning *Maus* (available as *The Complete Maus* (New York, London: Penguin, 2003)) and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* op cit have been referred to as the 'the Big 3' by comics scholar Roger Sabin as the definitive texts in the maturation of the comics medium. See *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 87.

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1940s and 1950s. The implication is that America would have produced material to the same quality had they been provided with the right economic, political and cultural environment, a transparent attempt to take the merit away from the Europeans for their innovations in the medium.

In reality, comics on both sides of the Atlantic have experienced censorship. The British comics industry has grown and developed without the benefit of the First Amendment. In 1955 in response to a campaign against horror comics parallel to the one in the USA, the British Parliament passed the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act that specifically targeted comic books.⁴⁶ As recently as the 1990s comics publisher Savoy was repeatedly harassed under obscenity charges, and the Customs Office still retains the right to confiscate imported goods.⁴⁷ Consequently, it would be reasonable to say that British censorship was at least as severe if not more so than American.

Yet the response of British creators to threatened censorship was different enough to those in the US to bring about the changes that let DeFalco call comics such as *2000AD* adult material. Led by Pat Mills and John Wagner, British comics excelled at finding ways to bring out serious issues under a guise seemingly flippant enough to slip past the conservative guardians of public taste – the experience of *Action* in the late 1970s was a

⁴⁶ The law remains in force. For a detailed discussion of how it came into being see Martin Barker *A Haunt of Fears* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). According to *The UK Statute Law Database* the law remains in force and was last renewed and modified in 2001. See Office of Public Sector Information ‘Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act’ on *The UK Statute Law Database* available at <http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk/content.aspx?LegType=All+Legislation&searchEnacted=0&extentMatchOnly=0&confersPower=0&blanketAmendment=0&sortAlpha=0&PageNumber=0&NavFrom=0&parentActiveTextDocId=1123823&ActiveTextDocId=1123823&filesize=19618> accessed 12/01/ 2009

⁴⁷ For more on Savoy see David Kerekes ‘Battered, Torn and Quartered: The Story of Savoy’(online) on *Savoy Web* available at <http://www.savoy.abel.co.uk/HTML/hdprss.html> accessed 12/01/ 2009

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catalyst for the disguised approach of *2000AD*.⁴⁸ Where DeFalco argued that comics should be more “realistic” in terms of character and setting, Mills and Wagner produced material that was more “realistic” in terms of being more political—a challenge therefore to what “realism” is.

However, it is possible to argue that the importance of British creators has been overstated. Roger Sabin makes this case and it is worth citing at length:

... the affect of British creators on direct sales in America was not quite as dramatic from an American perspective as British fans were led to believe. In Britain, the PR line had been that creators from *2000AD* were so talented that they were poached by American companies, and subsequently became solely responsible for reinventing American comics (an obvious attempt to sell more of their comics – new and old – in the UK market) The truth was a little less dramatic: for example, how the contributions of Americans Frank Miller, Bill Sienkiewicz and Art Spiegelman fitted into this scenario was never made clear.⁴⁹

This was a valid perspective in 1993 in a market overrun by gimmicks to take advantage of a collecting culture among fans. Comics were released with multiple covers to encourage collectors to buy more than one copy at a time, and after resisting full credits and proper attribution of writers and artists for decades, comics companies were now cashing in precisely by promoting a culture of celebrity creators.⁵⁰ Sabin’s cynicism towards such crass commercialism is understandable. Nevertheless the points are worth tackling one at a time.

First, that the American ‘perspective’ on the influx of British creators was not as significant as it may have appeared to be in the UK is normal. In the same way that a buzz might be created about a new sound in music, or a new film star emerges that happens to be

⁴⁸ e.g. *The Sun*’s “7p horror” campaign against *Action* – see Barker 1989 op cit p. 23

⁴⁹ Sabin 1993 op cit p. 175

⁵⁰ Ibid p. 68

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British, the “Britishness” of this new phenomenon will be less significant than its newness. In America, a buzz created around Alan Moore and his “gritty” comics writing focused more on the style of the comics and less on the Britishness.

Just as, when American A&R people first went to the UK to look for similar bands to the Beatles who they could market with equal success, they looked for the same aesthetic that The Beatles offered, rather than for original British talent. Thus they sought out The Dave Clark Five, The Searchers, and Gerry and The Pacemakers. This then established a route for a broader base of British musical talent to promote themselves in the USA. From the perspective of our current location in history, the situation with comics is similar with a few notable exceptions. The main difference was that domestic UK industry that flourished throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s is now a shadow of its former self. Gone are the publications like *Warrior*, *Crisis* and *Deadline* that seemed, at various points in the 1980s and 1990s, to indicate that a British scene could survive and flourish. Of all the adventure comics of the era, the only one to have survived is *2000AD*. In the pop world, the UK, although strongly influenced by American artists and record companies, retains an indigenous output that is not automatically exported to the USA. Successful British writers may still do stints on *2000AD* before starting work for US publishers, but within the direct market, the two industries, above anything but the smallest levels of distribution, have effectively merged.

It was possibly not until Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* that a British creator could work in the USA without an emphasis on the sort of political content, pioneered by Mills, Wagner and the other early creators on *2000AD* and which was so successfully exported by Alan Moore. Moore excelled at a style of comics that a group of creators had developed in

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2000AD. When DC returned to Britain to look for more creators after Moore they looked for people who could write or draw in a similar style and with a similar thematic approach to politics, thus they shaped expectation of what was expected from the creators who would follow Moore. In the same way that the music of the Beatles influenced who would succeed from the Mersey-Beat sound of the 1960s, so Alan Moore's work shaped who would first be asked to work in the US and the sort of comics that would be expected from them.

There is a final point to Sabin's argument here. It is focussed on the emergence of adult comics and the 'Brit Pack' was only a part of these wider trends. Creators like Moore, and later Gaiman, Morrison and the others, worked within a specific area of the direct market. Miller and Sienkiewicz were influenced by the work of Moore et al (and the Brits by them), and Art Spiegelman was working in a different area of the medium. What the British creators achieved was a shift in the values and potential of the commercial mainstream and pushed areas of it more firmly into the direct market arena.

This is a political shift and to conceptualise why it is important the work of Jacques Rancière is useful. Primarily his idea that politics lies not in the 'distribution and legitimization ... of ... powers ... places and roles', which he terms *police*, but in the equality of two people speaking who had not previously been considered the same.⁵¹ This extends into the notion that politics is the claim for representation by a group that previously either did not exist in the political sphere or were not equal as speaking beings. Thus politics always involves a conflict with the 'police' because once such a claim is recognised the manner in which the systems of distribution and legitimisation function must be changed.

⁵¹ Jacques Rancière *Disagreement* trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p. 28

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In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière suggests that the central way that groups capable of politics are formed is through their representation in art in a broad sense. The possibilities for politics are embedded within the ‘distribution of the sensible’, that is within what is perceived and where, with art in all its forms being the main way that new configurations of peoples and perspectives become possible.⁵² I would argue that the comics looked at in this thesis were a part of a “redistribution of the sensible” that took place in the 1980s in both the UK and USA. They occupied a space that was artistically and ideologically opposed to the dominant politics of the time and they did so not simply by challenging the policies of governments, but by questioning the representational basis on which they operated. As we will see, in Britain these comics tackled fundamental issues such as who the British state claimed to represent and how. Comics like *RoboHunter*, *Halo Jones* and *V for Vendetta* tackled a view of the nation that was exclusive by presenting the perspective of those excluded either rhetorically, economically or through the worst sorts of oppression. They did so through an invocation of history and an exploration of new alliances between marginalised groups in the space vacated by the attack on class. These explorations however, were substantive: they constitute a claim to representation of previously unrecognised groups, not just within the comics field, but within the dominant political discourse of the time. In America the opposite happened, a politics that expressed equality primarily in racial terms tried to confront the sublimated inequalities of class. This influence from British political sensibilities helped produce key texts like Alan Moore, John Totleben and Steve Bissette’s *Swamp Thing* and later Frank Miller’s *Batman: The*

⁵² See Jacques Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, New York: Continuum, 2004) pp. 7-46

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Dark Knight Returns.

Movements such as that formed around the *2000AD* group of creators are not merely shifts in small cultural networks, but are fundamental to the formation of new political groupings. As Rancière argues:

Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his “natural” purpose by the power of words. This *literarity* is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of ‘actual’ literary locutions. However, these locutions take hold of bodies and divert them from their end or purpose insofar as they are not bodies in the sense of organisms, but quasi-bodies, blocks of speech circulating ... They form, in this way, uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories and languages. In short, they contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible. A political collective is not, in actual fact, an organism or a communal body. The channels for political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification but those of ‘literary’ disincorporation.⁵³

The argument, perhaps presented somewhat opaquely here, is that art, broadly figured here as blocks of “speech”, enables politics to happen through the formation of groups of readers and viewers who are both challenged by the art and then take that challenge to a wider public. Fiction is necessary as a way of making political claims and negotiating the possibilities of those claims. In general terms the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is the relationship between what can be shown and who is claiming representation. Changing that distribution changes the possibilities for a political claim.

Structure and Selection of Texts

Through *RoboHunter* and *Halo Jones*, the thesis follows the success of *2000AD*

⁵³ Rancière includes film in this category of the literary so there is no reason to assume that he is being specific about “literature”, rather I read the term as being concerned with fictional narrative in general. Jacques Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004) pp. 39-40

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alongside material from similar comics published at the time – most notably *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, which appeared unfinished in Dez Skinn's *Warrior* and was finally completed in 1988 and republished in the US. As such, *V* represents a transitional text spanning the two countries. For purposes of comparison I then look briefly at two examples of American comics of the period immediately before the arrival of creators from *2000AD* to the USA: these are extracts from Frank Miller's *Daredevil* and Chris Claremont and John Byrne's *X-Men*.⁵⁴ We then move onto the work of Alan Moore in the United States by considering *Swamp Thing*, published in the US by DC Comics and created in collaboration with Americans artists Steve Bissette and John Totleben. *Swamp Thing* was written by Moore between 1984 and 1988 but the analysis will focus on the first two years of that run. Finally the thesis will assess the impact of the British creators on American comics through assessing the difference in the use of form and political themes in Frank Miller's work by comparing his 1983-4 *Ronin* with his celebrated *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* published in 1985-6. The choice of these texts helps to contextualise the work of other British creators in the US, for instance, Dave Gibbons who worked with Miller on *Give Me Liberty* and the continuing 'Martha Washington' series or Jamie Delano working with various different artists on *Hellblazer*.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Taken from collected editions - Frank Miller *Daredevil Visionaries: Frank Miller Volume 2* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2001) and Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (a) *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006)

⁵⁵ References for the comics listed – collected editions are detailed where appropriate: *Action* ed. Geoff Kemp et al. (IPC: 1976-7); *2000AD* ed. various (various: 1977-) [note: a full listing for *2000AD* will appear in the bibliography]; Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a) *V for Vendetta* (New York: Vertigo, 1990); *Warrior* ed. Dez Skinn (Quality Communications: 1982-1985); Alan Moore (w) Stephen Bissette, Rick Veitch and John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing vols 1-6* (New York: Vertigo, 1987-2003); Frank Miller *Ronin* (New York: DC Comics, 1987); Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) Frank Miller (w), Dave Gibbons (a) *Give Me Liberty vols 1-4* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 1990-1991); Jamie Delano (w), various (a) *Hellblazer: The Devil You Know* (New York: DC Comics, 2007)

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This selection of comics is by no means exhaustive. Space, and a methodology reliant primarily on close readings of the texts themselves, means that it is a limited sample selected from a vast array of comics published at the time, many of which, to varying degrees, could be considered part of the movement described here. The comics have been chosen as either representative of different phases in the general movement laid out (the specific selection from *2000AD*, *The X-Men*, *DareDevil* and *Ronin*) or key texts of the period (*V for Vendetta*, *Swamp Thing*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*). Where decisions have been over what to include or not, the main criteria was texts that would, collectively, help demonstrate what was at stake in this period and the movement of the British creators from the UK to USA. One way to facilitate this was to show the changes that occurred in the work of two key authors of the period, Alan Moore and Frank Miller. Both have been and continue to be celebrated as “masters” of the comics field and I hope that this thesis will demonstrate how they emerge as the most visible part of a trend within comics rather than as great talents working in spite of their medium. That said, there is little attention paid to their biographical details due to a strong influence from literary theory and (post)structuralist arguments that meaning lies in the interaction between reader and text rather than as a transmission of authorial intention.⁵⁶

Likewise, primary interviews have been avoided for a similar reason. The desires of an author to determine the intended meaning in their work could ultimately undermine the perspective of the critic and thus influence the output of critical analysis. In this way, interviews have not been undertaken for the simple reason that they could fundamentally

⁵⁶ See Roland Barthes ‘Death of the Author’ and ‘From Work to Text’ in *Image Music Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977)

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weaken the methodology and shift the emphasis from a critical and contextual reading to one placed within a discourse with the creators “authority” over their text. Creators do have a culturally ordained position of privilege in interpreting their own works, but that privilege does not make their interpretations any more valid than that of the critic or indeed the ordinary reader. As Northrop Frye puts it: ‘the Dante who writes a commentary on the first canto of the *Paradiso* is merely one more of Dante’s critics. What he says has a peculiar interest, but not a peculiar authority.’⁵⁷ Existing interviews have been used where they refer to the general period rather than to specific texts, the exception being an interview with Frank Miller by *The Comics Journal* in the final chapter where I point out the ways in which his own interpretations of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* fail to adequately address its content.

The selection of texts is equally not canonical as far as a canon for comics can be determined, nor is it intended to be; indeed a vigorous discussion over the relative merits of one text over another in period specific canons is a healthy part of any field of textual inquiry. Notable among the omissions is Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* which fulfils many of the criteria mentioned above. It engages directly in apocalyptic fears of a world in the grip of the Cold War, is engaged in a critique of Thatcher-Reaganism and was produced by two former *2000AD* creators for an American comics company.

The reason it has been excluded is its textual conventions, particularly around character are of a different order to the texts here. Indeed, while being celebrated as a triumph of post-modernism (a term I am somewhat suspicious of, but would characterise some of the traits of the comics I am looking at here – particularly around pastiche in

⁵⁷ Northrop Frye *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) p.5

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chapter 4), *The Watchmen* also has a specific kind of “depth” that marks it as a distinctly modernist text that pays close attention to a relationship between psychological complexity and form.⁵⁸ Although the character of Rorschach might be seen to equivalent to other characters looked at throughout the thesis in terms of the way in which their relationship is constructed with the reader; *Watchmen* is too much of an ensemble piece to fit the overall arc of the argument in this thesis. Like many other excluded comics (such as Paul Chadwick’s *Concrete*, Bryan Talbot’s *Luther Arkwright* or Howard Chaykin’s *American Flagg*), inclusion would have offered something different to the thesis, and while *Watchmen* is undoubtedly an important text others were chosen as they better exemplified the overall concerns. My reasons for not including *Judge Dredd* have also been stated (see note on p. 22).

The thesis is divided roughly into two halves, reflecting similar length work that employs close analysis as its primary methodology such as Charles Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics* or Joseph Witek’s *Comics as History*.⁵⁹ As in each of those books, in order to establish the necessary background for analysis of the texts central to the argument, the shorter first half of the thesis (chapters 2 and 3) discusses issues relevant to existing

⁵⁸ I am not alone in excluding *Watchmen* from a study of the period, Jordana Greenblatt makes a similar decision in her 2008 article on *V for Vendetta* and *TDKR* for *Image-Text* stating:

While critical and scholarly attention to Moore has tended to gravitate towards *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, which shares similar ethical concerns about the exercising of heroic power, foregrounds the construction of heroic subjectivity through emphasizing a central (if arguable) superhero/sidekick relationship. Although *Watchmen* does interrogate the functioning of the heroic self, such a self is constructed within a group dynamic, with no specific character serving overwhelmingly as an iconic stand-in for the transcendent potential of human subjectivity as a whole.

Jordana Greenblatt ‘I for Integrity: (Inter)Subjectivities and Sidekicks in Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta* and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*’ *Image-Text* Vol 4 Issue 3 (2008) available at http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v4_3/greenblatt/ Para 2

⁵⁹ Charles Hatfield *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) and Joseph Witek *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989)

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scholarship in the field, considerations for formal analysis, and the historical backdrop of censorship which nearly all Western comics have had to work within. The second half (chapters 4 to 7) looks at first British and then American comics of the period, before focussing on the arrival of British comics creators in the USA and a close look at key texts from that movement. The final chapter is focused on assessing the impact of the *2000AD* group on the work of Frank Miller and the partial way his work changed as a result.

Chapter 2: Methodology, Definitions and Critical Framework for Close Analysis of Comic Books

Close Analysis and Cultural Studies

This thesis presents an approach to comic books through an analytical take on cultural studies that places the text itself at the heart of the exercise. In bringing together cultural theory and recognition of the specificity of individual texts within the context of the medium used and techniques deployed, close analysis within cultural studies allows a movement from the specific text to the general argument in a way that other approaches do not. That ability to focus on individual texts, even individual moments of interaction with texts, and then “zoom out” to consider that reading’s role within a wider socio-cultural context is fundamental to the aims of this study. It also places importance on how the textual apparatus attempts to mobilise historical events to achieve a commentary on current affairs.

Comics do not occupy a familiar academic space (like the novel) and have been positioned in a wide variety of ways: alternately as imperialist propaganda; gallery art; a category within literature; pulp trash; magazines and more. One of the key things that this thesis will attempt to establish is the distinct nature of the medium as a means of expressing political ideas. The only way to do this effectively is to look at how comics are different to other forms and how that difference translates into the way they deal with the issues they address.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ This could be linked to the notion of ‘exceptionalism’ as discussed by Bart Beaty in ‘The Search for Comics Exceptionalism’ in *The Comics Journal* 211 (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1999) pp. 67-72; equally this

This close analysis approach is complementary to other methodologies and produces material on which further study on the same topic could build upon, but from another research perspective. Thus, a neo-Marxist political economy paradigm would look primarily at the institutional and publishing contexts, legal frameworks and shifting political terrain, or an audience/ reception approach would look to actual readers from the time to produce qualitative or quantitative data through surveys and/or interviews. Both of these alternative methodologies can benefit from a close analytical model from which to expand their modes of inquiry. Indeed as Douglas Kellner, one of the leading proponents of political economy in the field of media and communications, argues all three modes are an important part of an holistic approach to the cultural industries:

For a critical media/cultural studies approach to the media industries, both political economy and more sociologically and culturally orientated approaches to the study of media culture should be combined, as should text- and theory-based humanities approaches with critical social science approaches. For some decades now, however, advocates of media and cultural studies based in textual or audience analysis have been at war with those who advocate a political economy optic... The hostility between political economy and cultural studies reproduces a great divide within the fields of communications and culture between competing paradigms. In my view, the divide is an artificial one rooted in an academic division of labor.⁶¹

Thus, while scholarly work which gives primacy to the text has been questioned in some quarters of the cultural studies movement as a profoundly ideological methodology, this ideological positioning of the critic as “expert reader” is actually a necessity in order to

is an idea that has currency in other areas approached by culture studies as a discipline; see for instance David Abrahamson ‘Magazine Exceptionalism: The concept, the criteria, the challenge’ in Tim Holmes (ed.) *Mapping the Magazine* (London: Routledge, 2008) pp. 146-149

⁶¹ Douglas Keller ‘Media Industries, Political Economy and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation’ in Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (eds) *Media Industries: History Theory and Method* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009)

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establish how text communicates on different levels.⁶² Work that combines all three methods is rare across academia; in comics perhaps the only complete books to have done so successfully are Martin Barker's *A Haunt of Fears* and *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*. But even then, the argument in both books rests on Barker's close readings, the survey work or political economy-esque historical investigation only cohering when presented in conjunction with textual analysis. That Barker has since moved primarily into reception studies does not make his earlier hybrid methodologies any less valid.⁶³

The issue in combining these different modes of inquiry is partly one of skills and training. Despite being the main proponent of the reception studies approach, Barker's early work using that method was, in his own words, 'badly designed, it taught me nothing'; it was only through years of refining techniques and project design that he was able to reach a stage where he was working with functioning and effective methods. Equally, from his own training in the humanities as a philosopher, at an early stage in his research into comics he found that for close analysis of comics themselves 'the payoff was slow, but considerable'.⁶⁴ My background is in English literature with an MA in cultural studies, but from a department (Leeds) that took a humanities approach and firmly emphasised close analysis in conjunction with continental philosophy. As such, while I respect the importance of

⁶² Cf. Martin Barker and Anne Beezer eds. *Reading Into Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992) pp. 6-12 Suggesting (somewhat obtusely) that cultural studies should move towards more audience based ethnographic readings and away from purely textual analysis, mainly as a reaction against the semiotic/ideological analyses of the 1980s.

⁶³ Martin Barker op cit 1989 utilises a basic audience survey in his analysis of *Action*, and has continued to advance audience based research as an increasingly sophisticated mode of research. However this has largely moved away from work on the comics medium. See for instance Martin Barker ed. *Participations* (online: University of South Wales, Aberystwyth 2003-Present) available at www.participations.org accessed 18/01/2009

⁶⁴ Martin Barker 'KICKED INTO THE GUTTERS: or, "My Dad doesn't read comics, he studies them."' *International Journal of Comic Art*, 2002 4 (1), pp. 64-77 (p. 5 of pdf available at <http://cadair.aber.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/2160/1987/1/ComicsPiece,%20Barker.pdf> accessed 29 September 2009)

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other methodologies, and would be delighted to see work that utilised them to cover a similar period in the history of comics, the design of the thesis is to my own strengths and knowledge base and the way in which those skills could most appropriately navigate the subject matter.

My initial interest in comics as an area of study was driven by a fascination with how the medium communicated. Comics are a formally unstable medium with any text at liberty to break rules that other texts in the grouping of comics may seem to make absolute. In essence this means that unlike the printed word, the medium's "grammar" is not rigid and a range of disparate techniques can be used in any given comic to deliver its content. Close analysis is useful both as a means of understanding how comics structure their message, as a way to decipher political and social criticism, and the way in which external cultural shifts manifest themselves within a given text. The approach opens up the notion of how different readers might encounter the text: an understanding of how a text works in the reading of it is a requirement for, and corollary to, more audience-based research. Moreover, political economy needs to be able to build upon how content is presented to be able to make a case for the location of a text within wider political and economic contexts. To argue that a text has its location within a cultural paradigm of hyper-consumerism, you must first be able to identify the consumerist message in a text and how it is structured within a narrative.

I stand by all the above, but the relationship between close textual analysis and other kinds of research methodologies in culture does not provide explanation for why close analysis is important in and of itself. Stories, narrative if you will, are increasingly being recognised across the humanities and social sciences as one of the primary ways that we

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make sense of the world. This trend is going against a policy environment in higher education (in the UK at least) that puts more value on positivistic research that produces quantitative outcomes. A recent study into wellbeing provides a neat example to debunk this emphasis on the quantity of kinds of content as opposed to narrative resolution:

A. A newly married couple, couple A, go on a two week honeymoon. The holiday begins disastrously: each discovers much in the other which they had not noticed before, and they dislike what they find. The first two days are spent in an almighty row. They argue continuously over the next seven days, but begin to resolve their differences and come to a deeper appreciation of each other. Over the last five days they are happier and both feel that they have realised a relationship that is better than that which they had before their argument. The holiday ends happily. On their return journey, the plane that carries them explodes and they die.

B. A newly married couple, couple B, go on honeymoon. The first twelve days proceed wonderfully. On the thirteenth day their relationship deteriorates badly as each begins to notice and dislike in the other a character trait which they had not noticed before, at the same time realising that the other had a quite mistaken view of themselves. On the last day of the holiday they have a terrible row, and sit on opposite ends of the plane on the return journey. They both die in an explosion on the plane.

Which holiday goes better? From the hedonic [quantitative analysis of happiness] perspective it looks like holiday B. On any simple summing of moment-by-moment pleasures and pains, holiday B contains more pleasure and less pain. Some hedonistically inclined students and colleagues excepted, most people claim that holiday A is better. They characterise the story of holiday A as a happier one than that of holiday B. What counts in favour of holiday A is the narrative shape of the different episodes.⁶⁵

By looking at the quantity of details, in this case the “amount” of happiness in each holiday a positivistic researcher produces one way of understanding the two narratives, but the narrative itself chimes very differently to almost any other reader. As O’Neill puts it: ‘the

⁶⁵ John O’Neill ‘Living Well Within Limits: Well-Being, Time and Sustainability’ paper for *LIVING WELL (WITHIN LIMITS) - EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GROWTH AND WELLBEING* (Sustainable Development Commission Tuesday 8th April 2008) pp.14-15

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narrative structure of an episode or of a life matters to the global valuation one can properly make of it'.⁶⁶

While qualitative audience analysis in this example would probably be the best method to assess the way in which readers would respond, in more complex texts there is a limit to what such a method could say about the nuances of the narrative itself (unless, of course a study was undertaken of an audience of trained critical theorists). Formalistic narrative analysis in the manner of Vladimir Propp could produce another perspective, but by its nature this mode is reductive and better at looking at a wide selection of texts rather than the intimate details of a few.⁶⁷ In such a way, close textual analysis is the most accessible and directly productive mode of inquiry into the operations of narrative texts available. It is by nature idiosyncratic, encompassing various approaches and theoretical underpinnings, to give my approach a label would be perhaps to say it is both cultural materialist and semiotic as opposed to, say, philosophical hermeneutics, or producing biographical interpretations.

Although the thesis emphasises close reading, it does so with a clear set of priorities, rather than a simplistic desire to produce “definitive readings”. In doing so an approach to analysing comics is set out early on and adhered to throughout the thesis. These close textual priorities are established through an explanation of the methods for analytical work, through looking at existing critical work and examples. One decision is to focus on the page as an analytical unit drawing largely on the work of semiotician Thierry Groensteen who argues that composition in comics works on multiple dimensions, but that

⁶⁶ Ibid p. 14

⁶⁷ See Vladimir Propp *Morphology of the Folktale* trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968)

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the page in its bounded limits represents the ‘hyperframe’; as such I have taken it as the most appropriate discrete unit for analysis.⁶⁸ This enables the readings to go into meticulous detail about how each comic analysed structures its messages. Nevertheless, in doing so a solid grasp of the wider social environment in which the comics were produced is also essential. Comics were read and continue to be read in a historical context, and to understand them close analysis must be coupled with an exploration of the contemporary issues with which a text is in dialogue. Equally as important is a cultural context that places each comic within a constellation of other similar works. In this manner, the thesis works to a methodology that sees formal techniques, historical positioning and cultural relationships between comics as reciprocally informing.

In some ways the nearest approach to my own can be found in English literature through the New Historicism movement popularised by Stephen Greenblatt in his studies of Shakespeare that explore the relationship between a text and the culture it was circulated within.⁶⁹ Equally my idea of interrogating the way in which the text constructs a relationship with its readership is inspired by Wolfgang Iser’s work on the idea of the ‘implied reader’.⁷⁰ Far more central to the thesis however, is the manner in which I have

⁶⁸ Thierry Groensteen *The System of Comics* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) p. 30

⁶⁹ Greenblatt describes his aims thusly:

The textual analyses I was trained to do had as their goal the identification and celebration of a numinous literary authority, whether that authority was ultimately located in the mysterious genius of an artist or in the mysterious perfection of a text... I propose something different... If the textual traces in which we take interest and pleasure are not sources of numinous authority, if they are signs of contingent social practices, then the questions we ask of them cannot profitably center on a search for their untranslatable essence. Instead we can ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in maneagable aesthetic form, offered for consumption.

Stephen Greenblatt *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) pp. 3-5.

⁷⁰ For Iser the reader is as much a construct within the text as they are a physical being outside it. In relation to his chosen literary subject matter, he sums up his position thus:

Active participation is fundamental to the novel; the title of the present collection sums it up with the term

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drawn upon existing scholarship on comics (limited, sadly, by my own linguistic skills to works appearing in English) and this will be detailed in the rest of this chapter.

However, the distinction between these different underpinnings of the methodology is a statement of the critical concerns in the thesis rather than a division between analytical approaches. The selection of texts, critical techniques, and theoretical interrogations overlap continually. This goes to the heart of what contemporary cultural studies is about: the movement takes shape in a place where the traditional social sciences and humanities lack the methodological flexibility to make these sorts multi-disciplinary movements within criticism.⁷¹ As Pertti Alasuutari argues 'the corners of sociology, anthropology and literary criticism have been cut off or melted away to form and give space to [cultural studies].'⁷² Although in turn, other disciplines are increasingly open to the sorts of inter-disciplinary approaches that research in cultural studies has pioneered.

The discipline is not without its drawbacks. It is essential that cultural studies not exist in a vacuum where generalist theories are applied broadly across all media forms. Much as cultural studies has developed complex and sophisticated responses to everything from shopping to Shakespeare to continental philosophical method, so too it relies upon the strength of other disciplines to inform that research. To look at literature without literary theory, film without film studies, or the behaviour of shoppers without ethnographic method would be crass and reductive to a central set of totalising cultural theories. Thus it

'implied reader'. This term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualisation of this process by the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process – which will vary from one age to another – and not to a typology of possible readers.

Wolfgang Iser *The Implied Reader: Patterns of communication in prose from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974) p. xii

⁷¹ See Pertti Alasuutari *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies* (London, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995) pp. 23-25

⁷² Ibid. p. 24

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is also my hope that in contributing to the study of comic books, I will help open up the field of comics to future work in both medium specific researches and broader cultural studies.

In terms of this thesis, these factors are timely, as although the research here is presented in such a way as to be acceptable under this interdisciplinary rubric of cultural studies, it is also an exercise in comics studies, which has only been able to be described convincingly as a distinct discipline in the last few years. The work presented here draws upon a body of research that is now substantial enough support itself in the way that other medium based disciplines such as film or literary studies have done for decades. The key marker of this is that a reader has now been produced for the field taking in articles from twenty seven academics currently publishing on comics.⁷³ Yet it remains a discipline in its infancy, and by placing it within a complementary relationship to cultural studies I hope that I am helping to strengthen it rather than dilute its newfound vitality.

⁷³ Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (eds.) *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008)

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Analysis of Comics and the Question of Definitions

As with any close study of an aesthetic medium, the question of form is a central concern throughout this thesis. In looking at how the comics of the 1980s read their political environment, it is not enough to look simply at direct connections between visual, verbal and narrative references in the comics and the political environment surrounding their publication; we also have to understand the way in which the comics form expresses those connections and functions as an invitation to their audiences to read the world around them in a certain way. To do this we require an understanding of the manner in which readers engage with a comics text. While the impact of French science fiction, the American underground “comix” as well as mainstream British and American comics can all be seen in the selection, a strict focus on an aesthetic genealogy of this sort would distract from the main purpose of the thesis here and I will only be addressing specific influences as and when they are directly relevant to a text in question.

Until very recently, formal analysis of comic books in English has been dominated by a title written by the professional comic book creator Scott McCloud. His book *Understanding Comics* remained the most insightful, comprehensive and inventive study of the way in which comics communicate available to English speaking readers until Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen's translation from the French of Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* became available in 2007. To my mind, this second book has fundamentally advanced many of the questions on form not addressed in comics scholarship in English.

This does not mean that formal scholarship in English prior to the publication of *The System of Comics* should be ignored. For one thing the emphasis in Anglophone scholarship is very different from Francophone. Jan Baetens argues that the difference

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between US and European criticism is that European work is more abstract while the Americans are more practice orientated.⁷⁴ It is in some ways a question of address.

McCloud and other pioneers of formal criticism in English have come to theoretical work on comics as creators.⁷⁵ Their books are written for fellow practitioners, fans and the interested public as well as being targeted at a critical theory community. Thus, there has been an issue for those within academia working with genre defining texts which in themselves were written with little intention to, and do not, stand up to academic scrutiny. Samuel R. Delaney, who otherwise celebrates McCloud's work, sums up the problem with *Understanding Comics* as: 'an intricate interweave of insight and idiocy, played out against a set of wildly inaccurate historical assumptions'.⁷⁶ With Groensteen we have no such issue. His book, difficult by academic standards, is aimed firmly at a community of critics and will form the basis for a critical vocabulary for much of the thesis. This does not mean that McCloud's insights, or the work of academics in Britain and North America who have been largely (directly or indirectly) inspired by his book, can be ignored. In fact, they offer different approaches to the very precise formulations of Groensteen, many just as rigorous if not as comprehensive.

Arguments about where the boundaries of the medium start and end have been raging since scholarship on the subject began and the question has even become an issue in

⁷⁴ See J. Baetens 'A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation' in Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (eds.) *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) p.147

⁷⁵ For example Robert C. Harvey and Will Eisner

⁷⁶ Samuel R. Delaney op cit pp. 249, 224

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the drafting of UK laws.⁷⁷ Such arguments and issues testify at once to the plastic nature of the comics form and its capacity for continual reinvention and at the same time indicate the uncertain location the medium still occupies in our culture. New production and printing methods have enabled artists such as David Mack and Dave McKean to produce multimedia extravaganzas that are light years away from the four-colour, cheaply produced magazines that are their ancestors.⁷⁸ Advances in IT have led to the use of 3D modelling in some comics and the Internet has offered not just a new distribution system, but also opened up the possibilities for comics beyond the format limitations of the printed page.⁷⁹

Art forms using both sound and moving images emerging from the convergence of comics and the Internet are increasingly blurring the difference between comics, film, animation and the web-page-as-medium.⁸⁰ Yet even this is not new. Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée* was deeply comic-like combining a montage of still pictures with sound to tell a story of time-travel and apocalypse that uses techniques found in comics in the medium of film.⁸¹

Most scholarly work on comics will prioritise those aspects of comics that are the best suited to the texts under scrutiny. It is a common mistake in writings on the subject to suggest that those parameters somehow define the medium. An example of this would be

⁷⁷ For a detailed overview of some of the arguments around definitions see Mila Bongco's *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and The Concept of The Superhero In Comic Books* (New York: Garland, 2000) p. 50-54 For more on the legal question of definitions see Martin Barker *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London, New South Wales: Pluto Press, 1984) p. 39.

⁷⁸ See for instance Grant Morrison (w), Dave McKean (a) *Arkham Asylum* (New York: DC Comics, 1989) and David Mack *Kabuki: Circle of blood* (Orange: Image Comics, 2001)

⁷⁹ See Scott McCloud *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 2000) an early example of 3D rendering in comics can be seen in Frank Miller (w), Dave Gibbons (a) *Martha Washington Goes to War* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 1994)

⁸⁰ See for instance Demian5 *Demian 5 website* (online) available at <http://www.demian5.com/> accessed 27/04/2007

⁸¹ *La Jetée* dir. Chris Marker (Argos Films, 1962)

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the debate between the positions of R.C Harvey and writers inspired by Scott McCloud.

This is an indirect discussion where Harvey is seemingly disgruntled by the fact that much of his scholarship would be written out of the field by McCloud's definition. Harvey thus publishes articles that reassert that the most critical aspect of comics is the combination of words and pictures, as opposed to McCloud's insistence that the sequence of pictures is the primary defining feature. Harvey's objection is that by placing an emphasis on sequence, not only is the related discipline of cartooning removed from the field, but also, in his opinion, inappropriate things such as 'the Bayeaux Tapestry and Mexican codices' are included and thus: 'these definitions include comics as *quadruped* includes horses.'⁸²

Critics generally adopt variants of these two positions. David Carrier, for instance, is roughly in the Harvey camp declaring: 'The speech balloon is a defining element of the comic because it establishes a word/image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures illustrating a text'.⁸³ Others such as Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Dierick place themselves with McCloud by starting their definition with: 'The juxtaposition of fixed (mostly drawn) pictures on a support as a communicative act'.⁸⁴ Some like Mila Bongco accept the merits of both sides of the debate, arguing that there are comics that function without words and yet claims the absence of words is a significant part of those comics, thus restoring the

⁸² R.C. Harvey 'Describing, Discarding "Comics" as an Impotent Act of Philosophical Rigour' in *Comics as Philosophy* ed. Jeff McLaughlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) pp. 14-26

⁸³ David Carrier *The Aesthetics of Comics* (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, PA, 2000) p. 4 Carrier's book is contentious and will be referenced throughout this chapter. Still his project of proving that comics somehow represent a post-historical "solution" to questions raised in the tradition of European painting, seems to be of more interest to Art Historians than students of comics. This is mainly because Carrier does not believe that the comic has developed at all throughout its history rather that it came into being complete. This idea of comics as the teleology of high art unfortunately does little service to comics themselves as it sees the fact of their narrativity as a remarkable end point to art rather than as a fundamental starting point to a distinct medium. See pp. 107-123

⁸⁴ Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Dierick 'Introduction' in *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the Nineteenth Century* Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Dierick (eds.) (Brussels: VUB University Press, 1998) p. 12

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relationship with the verbal as a primary concern.⁸⁵ Despite this, most scholars express a recognition of the complexity such a definition is required to take on board: Lefèvre and Dierick's definition is 'prototypical'; Carrier suggests that the discrete juxtaposition of images is also important; and Bongco sees the idea of an effective definition as a tool that would help bring out the potential of the medium: unfortunately one that has not yet been achieved.⁸⁶

Groensteen's alternative to these arguments moves us away from a division between the verbal and the visual and relative prioritising of the two. While ostensibly falling firmly into the McCloud camp by stating he 'intends to demonstrate the primacy of the image', what he actually does is something far more encompassing.⁸⁷ Groensteen's book functions in itself as a definition. He discusses the question briefly in his introduction, but what emerges as a whole is a definition of comics as distinguished from other media forms: while painting (and photography) is concerned exclusively with the still image as totality; literature as the organisation of verbal sequences; film with the structuring of the image in time and in shot; comics are concerned primarily with the distribution of objects in (two dimensional) space. This constitutes a fundamental movement in the field of comics from what has gone before (in English). In Groensteen's analysis while both word and image are core elements, what makes the medium possible is the organisation of words, images and other tools (for instance thought and speech balloons, panel borders and caption boxes) on the page in discreet units. Although the organisation of these elements is often formulaic, it

⁸⁵ Mila Bongco *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York, London: Garland Books, 2000) pp. 45-7

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 54

⁸⁷ Thierry Groensteen *The System of Comics* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) p. 3

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is still the arrangement that makes the comics narrative possible. Speech balloons, captions, nested images, recurring visual references are all party to what he terms 'the Spatio-Topical system' and this in turn functions only when images have what he calls '*Iconic Solidarity*' – a concept which will be discussed later.

Groensteen suggests that 'any comic: ... only actualizes certain potentialities of the medium, to the detriment of others that are reduced or excluded'.⁸⁸ Like other scholars do by necessity, I will privilege the techniques throughout the thesis that seem most important in the comics I am analysing. I do so openly rather than attempting to bind my research by a definition which would always ultimately be found lacking. In the main, I rely on the principles for analysis set out by Scott McCloud and the comprehensive nature of Groensteen's work to fill the gaps when other concepts are needed. Both critics seem to be a closer fit to my approach to comics than the work of R.C. Harvey or others in the word/image camp.

Outside the bounds of the research presented here, whether this question of definition can be resolved exclusively through a formal analysis like Groensteen's, I am not entirely sure. The publishing practices in English are less settled than in French language comics. The French market is dominated by the hard bound album as the primary means of publication and has been since the 1970s. In the UK the tradition of serialisation via anthology comics, with its roots in cartooning magazines of the 19th century, or in America the 32 page monthly, stand in stark contrast to the more recent trend for publishing original or semi-original material in book length form often by literary publishers such as Penguin, Faber or Random House. This is complicated by the fact that some of these literary

⁸⁸ Ibid p. 12

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presentations may have started life as serialised comics: one key example is Chris Ware's award winning *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* which began life serialised in the creator's *Acme Novelty Library*.⁸⁹

Furthermore we must also accept Joseph Witek's distinction between long form (comic books) and short form (comic strips) comics. This is a distinction made between the three panel to-a-page strips which appear in newspapers as opposed to the continuing narratives found in serialised comic books and graphic novels. Witek's argument is built upon Will Eisner's assertion that 'sequential art' is a field in its own right of which comics are one example. Witek's distinction between strip and book is a recognition of two historically linked but independent fields of production:

The difference between comic strips and comic books seems at first to be one simply of length: a comic strip is a brief series of panels, a comic book a longer one. Indeed, comic books began life in the 1930s as anthologies of reprinted comic strips. But comic books have evolved their own generic, narrative, and formal conventions; they are not simply bloated comic strips. While comic strips and comic books are both manifestations of the sequential art medium ... they differ in their situations in the market place, in their cultural status, in their physical mode of presentation, and in the reading conventions they evoke.⁹⁰

Yet comic strips will sometimes be collected in bound editions and although these are marketed very differently, they often contain instances of continuing narratives between strips for instance in Aaron McGruder's *Right to Be Hostile*.⁹¹

A definition based upon formal properties alone cannot hope to encompass all this. Comics display such variety of content, quality, subject matter and format that new texts

⁸⁹F. C. Ware *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (London, New York: Jonathan Cape, 2001), F. C. Ware *Acme Novelty Library* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly 1993-present[most recent publication 2008])

⁹⁰Joseph Witek *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989) p. 6

⁹¹Aaron McGruder *Right to Be Hostile: The Boondocks Treasury* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003).

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continue to impress, break convention and push the medium forwards in new and interesting directions. The distinction between comic book, comic strip, and graphic novel is not dissimilar to the distinctions in poetry between ballads, sonnets and epics. Nevertheless both publishing and formal conventions in the different categories of comics are perhaps even more plastic than found in the long history of poetry. Taxonomies of comics could almost be better addressed as movements, national traditions and publishing mechanisms than in terms of an absolute question of definition via form. In the end, such an issue becomes a purely philosophical one, the onto-taxonomical status of a comic requiring a field moderately different from that of critical inquiry into specific texts.

Some scholars reject the question of definitions via form almost entirely: for example, Martin Barker's materialist position, holding that:

A syndrome of ideas has persistently constrained the history of the production of comics in Britain. It has changed over time, and its power to control has been subject to many other factors. Even so, we cannot answer the question 'what is a comic?' by formal qualities alone. A comic is what has been produced under that controlling definition.⁹²

Barker's case study is specific and looks at comics firmly identified (by himself as well as others) as a mass medium for children and young people. Here a question of a specific formal definition would become complicated as some of the texts he looks at contain a variety of different communicative forms, from photo montage to letters pages and advice columns as well as containing narrative comics. But more than this, what happens when a comic is republished as a graphic novel by a reputable literary publisher? Does it cease to be a comic even if it was serialised previously? Does the final word on its taxonomical status rest with the creator, the publisher, the printer or the reader? I don't want to dismiss

⁹²Barker 1989 op cit p. 9

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the importance of Barker's observation, but, much like other scholars, by privileging the production, his own argument about the bias against comics inherent in the positions of the medium's detractors is given more weight. Form, cultural status and mode of production are all different aspects of any given comic book. While a strict definition would be difficult to achieve that addressed all three areas (Groensteen goes as far as to call it 'impossible'⁹³), any thorough critical approach must acknowledge the issue, if only because so much of the scholarly work on the subject tackles it.

Thus, certain decisions have been made here to facilitate close study. These decisions are tactical as much as they are scientific and are necessary, due, in part, to the emerging state of theory on comics in relation to more developed critical frameworks established for other media.⁹⁴ The most important among these is that the activity of engaging with a comics text is one of *reading* not viewing, watching or seeing. This is a decision to distinguish the study of comics from the medium against which it (unjustifiably) receives a generally unflattering comparison: film. In line with a more general movement in the study of comics, Charles Hatfield sums this up:

Comics theory, then, has tardily arrived at a crucial stage, that of dismantling the once-useful cinema/comics analogy. The idea of comics as active *reading* has gained ground in critical conversation, and displaced the once-attractive comparison to film. This shift is politically loaded, of course, underplaying the complexity of audience participation in cinema... so as to stress the *difference* of comics... Crucial to this is the reinvocation of the written word as a more appropriate point of comparison.⁹⁵

David Carrier makes a similar case for the weakness of the comics/film comparison:

⁹³ Groensteen op cit p. 12

⁹⁴ How contentious is a definition of film for film studies, or literature for literary studies? There may (and should) be debate, but it is hardly *the* defining critical discussion.

⁹⁵ Charles Hatfield *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) p. 33

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Comics and films, developing at the same time, respond to the felt need for accessible populist art. Films, obviously impressive, have deservedly received a great deal of attention from academic scholars. Comics raise different, equally interesting philosophical problems. I am unwilling to dismiss them as merely a secondhand version of the movies.⁹⁶

He continues later:

My simpler point is that there is a distinction in kind between arts where other people's presence constitutes part of the viewing experience [cinema, theatre, opera, gallery art] and those art forms, like comics and the novel, where it does not.⁹⁷

There are three crucial and very different things at stake here. First of all, the emphasis on the filmic similarities in studies of comics was an attempt to emphasise its *visual*, non verbal properties as scholars of comics attempted to defend the medium against its critics who saw it as a dangerous inhibition to the acquisition of print literacy. The second is that unless the primacy of the reader in controlling the mechanics of time (and thus of all movement and action) in comics is recognised as central to the medium's communicative strength, it will always be considered an inferior kind of film. This comes down to the very simple (but enormously significant) difference between film and comics in that timing in film is controlled mechanically through its apparatus, whereas the reader controls the speed of a comic through their specific pace at reading panels and turning pages.⁹⁸ The third is the private nature of the reader's experience of comics: the convention for reading a comic is essentially solitary. Although film through the advent of the television, video player and DVD can be watched individually, the audio-visual display of cinema means that it is accessible in a social situation. The same is not true of a comic; it is experienced, like the

⁹⁶ Carrier op cit p. 50

⁹⁷ Ibid p. 62

⁹⁸ It may be worth mentioning at this point that the difference could be explained to an extent by the Gilles Deleuze's contrast between 'Any moment-whatever' of film and the 'privileged instant' of classical dance that can be found at the start of his book *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London, New York: Continuum 1986) more on this in Chapter 4.

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novel, by one person at a time (except with difficulty peering over someone else's shoulder).

Nevertheless this emphasis on comics as a *read* medium does not solve all the difficulties of engaging in criticism of its texts. The analysis of comics, as long as it consists of written or spoken language, will always be complex and bound by a contradiction in describing the experience of reading. On the one hand comics are a narrative form that the competent reader *experiences* as intuitive, on the other hand the explication of that experience (in anything other than the comics form itself) constitutes an interpretation of an order at least once removed from that of linguistic translation. Roland Barthes describes this effect in relation to static images: 'the meta-language that takes charge... at the moment of analysis is not specialised... we are left with barbarisms'.⁹⁹ This is not a problem with the meta-language *per se*, but an issue intrinsic to the nature of using one code to describe another. Groensteen agrees: 'the reduction to a linguistic statement corresponding to its immediate narrative "message" tends to mechanically overshadow [the imagistic nature of comics]'.¹⁰⁰ Explaining images through words will never capture the qualitative properties of the experience of seeing them, it is always an approximation. Compared to single images, comics further complicate the problem of description as they are constructed out of sequences thus rendering a second level of barbarism necessary - that of connecting the images. This renders a written description of a comic as of a different order from verbal translations between languages: instead, it is a transmutation across media.

⁹⁹ Roland Barthes *Image Music Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) p. 48

¹⁰⁰ Groensteen *op cit* p. 121

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Another consideration is that when words appear in comics they rarely function like normal prose.¹⁰¹ Nearly every significant work on comics has a theory on how comics alter verbal language. Will Eisner thinks this is so significant a difference that he capitalises the statement: 'TEXT READS AS AN IMAGE'.¹⁰² By this Eisner means that words are just as important to comics typographically as they are verbally – the capitalisation emphasising his point. This is true to an extent: although words still function linguistically, the conventions for their use are different from poetry or prose. From the early days of the modern medium in George Herriman's *Krazy Kat and Ignatz* or Richard F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* comics have often ignored conventions in spelling, grammar and syntax in their attempt to represent different dialects, idiosyncratic speech patterns and inflections in dialogue.¹⁰³ One of the ways to look at this would be to argue that as there are different rules for language use in prose and poetry, so there are different rules in comics, part of which is the deployment of written language as graphic element.¹⁰⁴ Comics have developed their own traditions in the use of words that while still linguistic are one of the many techniques that the medium deploys as a visual narrative medium.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ A good example of where a comic does use prose would be the moments in Dave Sim's *Cerebus* series where he will occasionally use large chunks of block text with illustrations to move the narrative in a very different way. When these comics switch from prose to comics and back again the effect is disruptive of the reading experience. When this technique is used the effect is a shattering of pace and a dislocation of the reader from the comics reading experience. In fact it could be argued at those moments where Sim resorts to using block type, those pages of his book cease to be comics. See Dave Sim *Jaka's Story* (Windsor Ont. : Aardvark-Vanheim, 1990)

¹⁰² Will Eisner *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985) p. 10

¹⁰³ See George Herriman *Krazy Kat and Ignatz 1925-1926* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004) and Ohio State University Library *The Yellow Kid* available at <http://cartoons.osu.edu/yellowkid/index.htm> no date, last accessed 04 May 2010

¹⁰⁴ The same could be argued of advertising, magazines, posters, web pages and to a lesser extent newspapers.

¹⁰⁵ This is not to suggest that literature does not play with spelling, grammar and syntax, it does, but the effect when surrounded by prose is significantly different from when embedded in a series of picture in comics. One significant convention that David Carrier describes as a 'great philosophical discovery' is the speech balloon. (op. cit. p4)

Virtually every scholarly book on comics attempts to cope with these issues in different ways. Some try to play down the critical difficulties inherent in the comics form to enable them to use methodologies learned from other kinds of textual analysis: for example, literary theorist Geoff Klock in his Bloomian *How To Read Superhero Comics and Why?* states: 'If this book draws attention to the "writer" more than the "artist," then, this is because of a bias that connects the narrative with the writer and because more often than not this book analyzes the more abstract "story," only occasionally providing detailed commentary on specific images'.¹⁰⁶ Others choose to emphasise common techniques used by comics creators, like Robert C. Harvey's 'visual/verbal blending' or the assertion of conflicting codes like Mila Bongco's 'text-image conflict' thus avoiding the impossibility of adequately re-rendering the sequence.¹⁰⁷ Still others, like Bradford W. Wright, dismiss the issue entirely claiming: 'there are intellectual pitfalls in analyzing something like comic books too deeply'.¹⁰⁸ A common approach is to view comics as a kind of pictographic linguistics with a grammar and syntax, for instance Mario Saraceni's *The Language of Comics*.¹⁰⁹ Groensteen presents us with the idea of a system, which he also refers to as a language (possibly a translation issue), to which the notions of grammar and syntax are alien and instead replaced by the aforementioned spatio-topia and iconic solidarity, this then coupled with his theories of general and restrained arthrology (a term which suggests sliding together to create movement from the Greek arthron: articulation) which identify the narrative processes in the text as a whole or in individual sequences.

¹⁰⁶ Geoff Klock *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why?* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003)p. 15

¹⁰⁷ Robert C. Harvey *The Art of The Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) p. 4 also see Harvey 2005 op cit; Bongco op cit p. 46

¹⁰⁸ Bradford W. Wright *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins UP, 2001) p. xviii

¹⁰⁹ Mario Saraceni *The Language of Comics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003)

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It would be very difficult to make use of all the different approaches and specific terminologies suggested by various critics. Instead, I will focus mainly on the critical and formal concepts (and their theoretical implications) put forward by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, and to a lesser extent from Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, particularly the chapter 'An Art of Tensions: The Otherness of Comics Reading'.¹¹⁰ Both of these authors rely heavily, albeit at times indirectly, on the pioneering work done by Will Eisner in his book *Comics and Sequential Art* in 1985.¹¹¹ Eisner, an American creator who had been working with comics since the 1930s, was the first person to produce a detailed analysis of the way in which the form worked.¹¹² In a sense, most Anglophone academic work on the form of comics builds from that early book.

If Eisner was the progenitor of a critical approach, then McCloud was its great missionary. *Understanding Comics* was followed by *Reinventing Comics* and more recently by *Making Comics*.¹¹³ Read by architects, graphic designers, art historians and comics enthusiasts alike, the ideas McCloud presented provoked thought and debate about the uses of sequential art and comics, and about the nature of visual culture in general. One recent anthology of comics theory states in its introduction that: 'McCloud is the most quoted writer in the present volume. *Understanding Comics* has great heuristic value and may have prompted more scholarly discussion on comics than any other book in the English

¹¹⁰ Hatfield op cit

¹¹¹ Eisner 1985 op cit

¹¹² Others had made some limited observations in the course of studies less concerned with form than other aspects of the medium. c.f. David Kunzle *History of the Comics Strip: Volume 1 The Early Comic Strip – Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1454 to 1825* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press 1973) p. 2 In Europe comics had been of academic interest for their formal properties since at least the 1960s in France and the 1970s in Italy – See Chapter 3 for examples from Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco.

¹¹³ Scott McCloud *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 2000); Scott McCloud *Making Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006)

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language.'¹¹⁴ That said, for the student of cultural studies, McCloud's arguments about comics veer too much towards the universal, making assumptions about comics that, while useful for the practitioner, do not hold up to academic scrutiny. His pop-phenomenology attempts to argue that the experience of comics is intuitive and linked to our basic experience of being humans. This, as I will show, runs contrary to the evidence we see in sequential art historically and moreover is a very difficult claim to prove.

In terms of an initial framework for analysing comics much of McCloud's work is ground-breaking and advances the study of comics in ways that Groensteen, with his meticulous logical rigour, cannot. Thus McCloud's ideas about the function of the movement between panels driving the readers engagement with the narrative and his concept of a two-axis scale of visual style will be used as a starting point to explore some of the aspects of the comics form that Groensteen only touches on tentatively. In addition some of this can be balanced by Charles Hatfield's chapter which firmly places comics in a cultural context (as a field of literature). Hatfield's study presents its own problems, but it enumerates the different types of codes and the ways that they inter-relate, drawing upon a range of concepts from different scholars and practitioners such as Eisner, McCloud, Harvey, Witek, Kannenberg Jr, and more. Nevertheless, that Hatfield positions the different aspects of the reading experience as in tension is powerful but unsustainable; this becomes apparent in his close readings. It is an error *produced* through the difficulty comics present to established critical methodologies. Although words and pictures in a comic can be placed in tension to produce an effect; the use of the two codes that seem to

¹¹⁴. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons 'Introduction' in Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons op cit p. xiii

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conflict intellectually, actually complement each other on the page when used by a skilled comics creator. However for the critic to explain how this happens, the importance of the layout as Groensteen argues is critical to avoid placing undue importance on the different functions of the two codes.

David Lewis - discussing picture books, but his ideas are applicable here - argues that the difficulty in coping with multiple aspects of the text when reading sequences of images is not the result of the text itself but is result of a critical *complexity*. Due to the need for a sophisticated critical framework to overcome what I called earlier a transmutation across media, it is the framework(s) themselves that produce this idea. Yet as Lewis points out: 'If we refer to the complexity of such a book we are not in any way passing judgement on its difficulty'.¹¹⁵ Complexity is embedded in the method, not necessarily the text. David Carrier agrees, although he hints that comics may have some intuitive relation to our understanding of the visual: 'With comics, what is now hard to reconstruct is how the seemingly complex conventions... were, without any explanation, mastered rather quickly by everyone who read them.'¹¹⁶

The next chapter is my own attempt at producing such a framework for analysis. What I will attempt to show is the way in which certain techniques have emerged or vanished constitutes part of an evolving comics literacy. This idea of varying degrees of legibility in comics will become increasingly important as the thesis progresses. I start by looking at early 20th century examples of sequential art and go on to argue that the one of the key things in the development of comic books was finding ways to gain and hold the

¹¹⁵ David Lewis *Reading Contemporary Picture Books: Picturing Text* (London, New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001) p. 52

¹¹⁶ Carrier op cit p. 45

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reader's attention. By the end of the century, these techniques had developed to the extent that ambitious creators could use these conventions to shock readers simply by breaking established convention.

Chapter 3: Comics, Meaning and the Reader

Two Immediate Ancestors of Comic Books

In primitive times, the teller of stories... served as entertainer, teacher and historian. Storytelling preserved knowledge by passing it from generation to generation. This mission has continued into modern times. The storyteller must first have something to tell, and then must master the tools to relay it.

Will Eisner¹¹⁷

Picture based narratives have been used since humanity first started to crush plants into pigments and paint on cave walls. It is a type of communication that emerged before the alphabet (possibly alongside speech) and has continued in various manifestations throughout history.¹¹⁸ Examples of sequences of narrative in pictures date back to Ancient Egypt and Trajan's column in Ancient Rome.¹¹⁹ These represent what some have claimed are the direct ancestors of the modern comic medium, and yet, while there are similarities

¹¹⁷ Will Eisner *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Tamarac FL: Poorhouse Press, 1996) p. 7

¹¹⁸ The claim about speech comes, unsubstantiated, from Will Eisner 1996 op cit 'The earliest storytellers probably used crude images buttressed with gestures and vocal sounds which later evolved into language' p. 8. However this parallels with Lancelot Hogben *From Cave Painting to Comic Strip: A kaleidoscope of human communication*. (London: Max Parish and Co, 1949). Chapters 2 and 3, pp. 39-79. He argues that drawings emerge from totemic markings in the early formation of the incest taboo and that writing emerged from the use of these totemic symbols in recording harvest times in the early calendar. His theory links astrology, naming, and pre-familial social structures to series of pictures that would be concurrent with the development of language. It would also have been a way of marking property: 'We may assume that no little precision was a necessary part of the magic identification in the earliest phase of man's exploits in picture making, but such precision would become less and less important through repetition of familiar conventions as time went on. Less and less detail would be essential to recognition, and a simpler, more conventional symbol would be more adaptable to its imprint as a charm on human skin, on the handle of a weapon, on a rude monument to mark the passage of the hunting seasons or on clay vessels baked in the fire.' p. 32. See also Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996 [1976]) particularly pp280-295: 'The first writing is thus a painted image. Not that painting had served as writing, as miniature. The two were at first intermingled: a closed and mute system within which speech had as yet no right of entry and was shielded from all other symbolic investment.' p. 283 This painted image would become a sequence to convey a message, in many ways the comic book is a return to this closed pictorial system with words as a supplement. Derrida's argument is that writing has a history distinct from speech, and in its earliest form it was pictographic.

¹¹⁹ See Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Paradox Press/DC, 1993) pp. 10-15

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in the use of sequences of picture these are not yet comics *per se*: they operated by different conventional rules and were situated differently within their cultures. Will Eisner's term 'sequential art' would perhaps be best to describe them 'to denote the overall mode of narrative of which comic strips and comic books are specific and distinctive forms'.¹²⁰ Sequential art as a mode of expression would include not just comics, but, by Eisner's arguments, things such as Hogarth's paintings, passenger safety leaflets on trains and aeroplanes, some scientific diagrams, furniture assembly instructions and more.¹²¹ Yet comics, in their various manifestations, are the primary modern narrative form to emerge in the use of sequential art for fiction, and this chapter seeks to demonstrate how a set of common techniques and practices have developed over the course of their history to engage and communicate through a relationship with an imagined reader that is constructed within a given text.¹²²

The ability to read comics on a basic level is a common part of living in a contemporary literate society. Comics are often considered a simple form; appropriate mainly for children and perceived not to stretch our cognitive capabilities as much as, say, a Dickens novel.¹²³ In terms of exercising our ability to read block text, comics are less intensive; switching as they do between pictures, words and layout as their channels of

¹²⁰ Witek op cit p. 6

¹²¹ See Eisner 1985 op cit pp. 139-146 Also McCloud 1993 op cit p. 20

¹²² For a diagrammatic timeline of the history of sequential art from the first woodcut print in 1380 right up to the present day see D.B. Dowd and Todd Hignite (eds.) *Strips, Toons, and Bluesies: Essays in Comics and Culture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004) pp. 82-106. Again, from the 20th Century onwards, the timeline displays a startling bias towards the US industry with European comics almost entirely erased from the century.

¹²³ Some commentators have suggested that Dickens was often considered as literature for the masses when originally published. However, the commonly cited article at the height of the penny dreadful scandal: 'The Literature of the Streets' in *Edinburgh Review* January 1887 (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1804-1929) pp. 40-65 actually praises Dickens as an example of good literature in opposition to other more sensational writers producing cheap mass produced texts.

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communication. But to suggest that they are easier to decipher is misleading. What I want to emphasise in this chapter is that comics are an art form that have developed with their readership: the ability to read distributions of sequential pictures, is a learned skill: creators introduce their readerships to new techniques as their ambitions for the medium advanced. A competency in reading comics is an eminently cultural disposition like language, but while many comics rely on a certain level of verbal literacy they are not quite comparable things, although comics do utilise some of the same learned conventions as the written word.¹²⁴

In the early days of the medium the recognised practices of established literacies were used to help early readers understand what they saw. This was a form of reader address of the reader that indicated expectations, not of who the readers were and how they would relate to the text (which will be a concern further into this chapter), but of what they were *capable* of comprehending in this new mode of communication. Some early comic strips featured numbered panels, despite the fact they ran from left to right, top to bottom and for the most part were evenly spaced.¹²⁵ Moreover, text was often separate from the

¹²⁴This is by no means a universal opinion. For instance Anne Marie Barry suggests that images tap into an intrinsic human experience that language does not: 'Words represent an artificially imposed intellectual system removed from primal feeling; images plunge us into the depth of experience itself.' Anne Marie Barry *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image and Manipulation in Visual Communication* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997) p.75 quoted in David A. Beronä 'The Work of Gross, Dorgathen, Drooker, and Kuper' in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (eds.) (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2001) p. 29

¹²⁵For further examples see Kunzle op cit. Many of the broadsheets found in this text, use this technique. However, the practice was not universal in early strips: some French comics strips in the 1880s dispensed with both panel numbering and word captions altogether. Kunzle describes this as 'graphic and narrative acceleration' although I would debate the result of accelerated reading as an effect of removing words (it can have numerous effects – Beronä argues that wordless comics take “extra time” (op cit p38)), the example of *Chat Noir* certainly marks France of the 1880s as a society containing sophisticated readers of sequential images. Kunzle notes however that some readers found the strips difficult to comprehend to the extent that on subsequent pages of the magazine a gloss would occasionally be provided for the strip. See David Kunzle 'Willette, Steinlen and The Silent Strip in the *Chat Noir*' in Robin Varnum and Christina T.

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speech bubbles and tended to run in a continuous fashion across the page. Figure 2 shows an instalment of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, a weekly comic strip by Winsor McCay from 1905. It demonstrates the kind of formal reading assistance creators offered at the turn of the century. In the figure, we can see characters based on the fairies from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* entering the dreams of the protagonist Nemo. Puck, renamed Lunatix, is sent out from Dreamworld to bring Nemo back with him. Nemo floats up to the gatehouse moon on his crumbling bed, only to flee from Lunatix when he is asked to go with him.

McCay is clearly making two assumptions about his readership. The first thing to notice is that he assumes panel continuity would not be automatically recognised, so that individual frames are numbered, directing the readers' eyes where to go to next. This technique is one that McCay used in his early Nemo strips but largely abandoned later. However, numbering can be helpful if it is assumed that the readers *will* read in the conventional left to right manner, and the cartoonist wishes to disrupt this. Here, for example, there is a central circular panel that disrupts the natural continuity and could potentially create confusion in the reader. Panel 8 is the visual focus of the piece: the anthropomorphised moon represents the gate house between the real world and the world of dream with Nemo and Lunatix mirrored on either side of its gaping mouth. In this case the numbering allows this floating panel, an established but rarely used device in comics, due to its relative difficulty in comprehension, to be placed with impunity. This numbering

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structures the page as a unit (what Groensteen terms the hyperframe¹²⁶), indicating how the sequence of individual panels are distributed not just in space, but in narrative order.

McCay, one of the pioneers of the modern comic, could not yet assume that his readership would navigate the intended order of the panels with or without the aid of numbering; the use of images to display a temporal sequence is something that people learn to read only through exposure to sequential art.

The second assumption that McCay made was that prose in the comics should flow regardless of the images with which they are connected. Figure 1 contains a continuous prose narrative that accompanies specific images at different junctures, yet both the verbal and pictorial elements could function separately. This use of text and image is closer to illustration than many comics: in illustration pictures supplement a narrative but are not essential to it. This is not quite the case in the example, where each element reinforces the other rather than remaining mutually independent. Like the numbering, the prose is another support for a readership not used to deciphering sequential images. Yet, as with the floating panel, McCay is starting to use techniques that hint at the potential that comics would go on to fulfil.

In panels 5 and 6 the narrator says: [5] 'But the vanishing of his bed, piece by piece, [6] kept him so busy guessing, that sight-seeing was out of the question.' What this suggests is that, unlike Nemo, we, the readers, do have time for sight-seeing. We are in a privileged position in the text: able to see the dream world that the impish Lunatix has laid on for Nemo with the permission of Oberon and Titania. While later on, comics would often (but certainly not always) tie text and image together in discrete panel units, what McCay is

¹²⁶ As opposed to the multiframe which is any given set of panels taken together. See Groensteen op cit p. 30

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demonstrating for us here is the central role the reader assumes in the reading process – that is, he is demonstrating what pictures and words can do in conjunction. In comics, this role is the act of putting together different elements or codes to create a narrative that is more than the sum of its parts. With this page-long strip he may be holding the reader's hand through a set of emerging conventions, but he also exemplifies the very things which would make comics one of the most widespread media for large parts of the twentieth century.

The pace at which visual narratives became a fundamental part of the cultural milieu can be seen in the fact that in the midst of the Great Depression Lynd Ward's novel *God's Man* was a huge success. What is remarkable is that it contained only pictures and no words less than 25 years after McCay's cautious example above. Ward's wood cut narratives are not exactly comic books, but the rising levels of comics literacy would have helped to make his experiment successful.¹²⁷ The sequence in figure 3 demonstrates how this purely pictorial mode of Ward's operates (these originally appeared one per page).

The scene takes place as the hero, an immigrant artist who comes to an American city, is imprisoned for raging at a system that places money above love. In the sequence, we see the protagonist escaping from prison by jumping the guard when he is brought food, stealing his uniform and then discarding it once he is out and free in the city.

To make this narrative function several techniques are in operation. First, we need to be able to recognise characters and objects as consistent from one panel to the next and over the course of the whole comic forming a narrative. This may sound obvious, but it is what Groensteen calls 'iconic solidarity' and is 'the unique ontological foundation of

¹²⁷ Franz Masereel is another, slightly earlier example, of a woodcut novelist. His work could equally have been addressed here.

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comics'.¹²⁸ In literature, the proper noun or direct object can identify an object as one that has appeared in the narrative before; in film, we usually recognise a character through the actor and rarely have to worry about our perception being thrown by a change of pose as we can see the actor in motion; in painting or sculpture, we only have to observe something once as there is no sequence, thus no need to maintain recognition through time and/or space.

Sequential art is unique in that, to function, it requires index clusters forming, over the course of a comic, into what I term the *object precedent*. This is one of the key aspects of iconic solidarity and is an idea Groensteen leaves underdeveloped. What it means is that for recognition to be established throughout a narrative, characters must be visually introduced and that introduction should provide enough indexical information for the character to be instantly familiar in successive panels as they will often not be shown in exactly the same way. While in the sequence in figure 3, the main character has already been established in previous pages, we can see that there are details to ensure that he remains recognisable. This is not how we would identify people from features in a photograph, as that works on the basis of a physical referent.¹²⁹ The characters in these wood-cuts are stylised with their features symbolic and/or indexical as much as they are iconic. Thus we know the protagonist from his gaunt face and floppy hair and the guard from his moustache and policeman's hat.

David Lewis describes this process in terms of classic reader-based narrative

¹²⁸ Groensteen op cit p. 17

¹²⁹ It is similar however to how we would continue (or alternatively fail) to recognise someone from a series of photographs having never seen that person “in the flesh” as it were.

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theory:¹³⁰

The meaningfulness of a picture for any particular viewer will not depend solely upon his or her ability to read off its representational sense – whether it shows a pig, an eel or a human being – but will also depend upon the function, the use to which the picture is put. In the case of the pictures in picture books, this is first and foremost a matter of contributing to a sequence which in most cases, though not all, serves to engender a narrative. Apart from the first and last images in a picture book the pictures are always preceded and succeeded by other pictures and the whole is held together in reading through ecological processes of anticipation and retrospection.¹³¹

While Lewis' arguments in other places are difficult to reconcile with my own (especially on the relationship between pictures, language and meaning), his point here about picture books helps to develop the argument I am making. When we see the gaunt face or floppy hair we take in these details as representative of the main character; likewise the moustache and the hat of the policeman. Thus these features (indices if you will) have a function that is not purely aesthetic: they indicate who we are looking at, and demonstrate their changing position in the narrative. In this way, we look both backwards and forwards from any image as Lewis suggests. Backwards in terms of which indices previously referred to which object and forwards in the sense that we recognise that when we see certain features again we will know what the object is, even if the perspective from which it is drawn or action in which it is engaged is radically different from what we have seen previously and would otherwise be unrecognisable or indistinguishable from other objects. So in reading sequential art, one of the primary learned skills is the ability to accumulate a set of indices over the course of a given text (or constellation of texts) that will enable us to grasp the operation of specific sequences. Thus, like Lewis says the pictures are functional (indexical) as much as they are

¹³⁰ e.g. Wolfgang Iser *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974) p. 282 Reading is an activity 'interweaving anticipation and retrospection'.

¹³¹ David Lewis *Reading Contemporary Picture Books: Picturing Text* (London, New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001) p. 128

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representative (iconic): everything in the narrative world needs distinct features that can be simply and easily recognisable - clothes, hair and other accoutrements of character rarely change.¹³²

There are other objects in the sequence that operate in a similar way. The first obvious one is the prison cell relying on the widely held cultural significance of barred doors and windows. While established in the first image, it is reinforced in the second and third to make sure we are aware of its emotional impact on the hero. Moreover once established so strongly, we no longer need its explicit index in the fourth woodcut: it allows Ward to put the emphasis elsewhere – upon the impending struggle, with the desperate artist getting ready to jump his warden.

Yet the policeman's hat remains the most interesting example, as it signifies on both the specific and the abstract levels. Before the fifth panel it is used to identify the policeman, both as a policeman and as the policeman that is guarding the hero (the specific character also identified by his handlebar moustache, bright buttoned uniform and square jaw). Our cultural knowledge of policemen's uniforms makes the hat into a symbol too, informing us that while on one level this is a policeman, on another he connotes the law that the protagonist is rebelling against. In the fifth panel its signification becomes less stable. From the way in which I have laid out the images – as if in a comic - it is immediately obvious that the artist overpowers the policeman, and escapes, discarding the hat as he runs off. Yet in the original, the image of the hero throwing the hat into the rubbish bin is on a different page from the fifth woodcut. Because of this, we cannot

¹³² An obvious exception which in fact demonstrates the point is superheroes changing costume between hero and alter-ego modes. Of course the change of costume is then indicative of the change of mode and thus this still applies.

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immediately tell who has overpowered who. The build up of signifiers establishing the two characters and the location are effaced, leaving just the prison door and two unidentifiable figures: one prone and bare-headed, the other dominant and wearing the police hat.

Without the sixth panel we would be more likely to assume that the policeman was able to fend off the attack, as the hat had come to be associated with him rather than the artist. As it is, the very techniques used earlier to establish character recognition between panels, are here used to alienate us. The hat becomes a disguise, and we the readers are just as fooled as the unseen policemen that the artist uses it to sneak past. There is also a more abstract symbolism here: the police hat becomes a metonym for the law just as the reader's position is put into a state of uncertainty. The hat becomes an unstable sign, the very thing that the law cannot be. Thus, its symbolic content here is as unsettled as the reader's is, until the law is “trashed” and the hero leaves the city and society for good.

In many ways, this is the opposite of the effect used in the McCay example. There the images gave us a privileged position: we were able to see what the characters could not; here the character knows what we do not, that is he is able to conceal his identity from us, by manipulating the signifiers that have established who he is and who he is not. In the Ward example, iconic solidarity is disrupted by the very thing that makes it possible: the play of the object precedent alienating the unifying visual regime to create an effect of uncertainty. Yet in both cases what is established is a coherence that enables the reader to instantly recognise that the pictures are connected – in the case of McCay this is reinforced by the numbering. This coherence is a function of style which will be discussed further later on.

The comparisons between the two examples go further. Although neither is a comic

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book per se, they demonstrate two different approaches that sequential art can take and the wide range of uses available for sequences of images. The McCay strip is an example in which all the images sit on one page and the design of the panels in relation to one another is what gives the piece its strength. The Ward woodcut novel features one image per page, so takes advantage of the way in which sequence progression can be played with through a process of delayed revelation. Furthermore, while Ward's book is completely wordless save the title and chapter headings, McCay provides a verbal narrative that overlaps and reinforces the pictorial sequence creating a doubling of meaning that gives the reader an excess of explanation ensuring that the plot makes sense, but also providing a complimentary dialogue between the visual and the verbal that places the reader in a complex position to both. Both of these examples are key steps in the development of modern comic books, they demonstrate the early stages of some of the vast agglomeration of techniques that make up the modern medium.

Style and the Imagined Reader

In his essay on Scott McCloud and the paraliterary Samuel R. Delaney argues that what is most valuable in *Understanding Comics* is how McCloud deals with what traditionally people writing about comics have called 'line'.¹³³ This encompasses the way in which things are drawn reduced to their smallest constituent components – lines on paper - and entails an analysis of the way specific techniques, in both the pictorial and linguistic modes, can communicate a range of different ideas.

To initiate the discussion McCloud uses the necessary conceit of separating form from content. As Delaney rightly points out this is a theoretical exercise, one that cannot be successfully sustained in practical critical analysis:

The division of form and content is a necessary (but only provisional) critical fiction. The reason that it is only provisional is because, at a certain point in the discussion, form begins to function as content – and content often functions as a sign for the implied form with which that content is conventionally dealt. If the critic chooses to focus his or her observations in *this* delicate area for any length of time, the separation of form and content, so useful in other situations, ends up creating more problems than it solves.¹³⁴

McCloud's ideas can only be developed if we accept this division which then enables its usage in other contexts. Nevertheless, despite McCloud's own careful use of form, as the content itself is about formal considerations, *Understanding Comics* demonstrates just how easily the distinction breaks down. In direct contradiction to McCloud's own arguments, the book constitutes an absolute fusion of form and content, partly because its mode of explanation relies on this synergy. This is in fact its strength. By explaining comics through

¹³³See Samuel R. Delany *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999) p. 247 – Delaney deals with many of the problems that McCloud's book creates for critical theory. As I largely agree with his arguments I will not repeat them here and instead refer readers to this book.

¹³⁴*Ibid* p. 254

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comics, none of the approximations of using one media to describe another come into play. However like all explanatory texts, the purpose-designed-examples in McCloud's work tend either to overstate the power of an effect or to render it banal. Nevertheless, from this division of form and content, the book opens up two key areas of inquiry: the effect of style; and the dynamic of images in sequence.

To begin, we will look at the McCloud's ideas on style manifest in his visual scale of representation (see figure 4). He constructs a scale along two axes. Along the X axis we move from photographic realism to absolute minimalism of line. Along the Y axis, the scale progresses from the bottom where every line has a definite pictorial purpose, that is, every line is supposed to correlate to a feature or detail in the world – a definable physical phenomena if you will - to the other end which is pure abstract form - the line in and for itself. This becomes an encompassing gradient of visual *style*, which without further elaboration is of little use except as a tool for categorisation. Yet McCloud develops what he calls his 'Big Triangle' theory of visual culture through the assertion that, as we move from high detail (photo-realism) to an absolute abstraction in visual detail (along the x axis), we are also moving from the representationally specific to the representationally universal (which he ultimately links to language, although pictures and words remain divided by the right hand line he terms the 'picture plane').¹³⁵

As a concept the theory, although rooted firmly in the study of comics, deals with the entirety of static visual communications including written language, which is presented both typographically and linguistically (although less successfully for the latter). Although the diagramme in figure 4 functions equally across all visual media, it is in comics and

¹³⁵ See Figure 3 and chapter 2 of McCloud 1993 op cit pp. 24-59

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animation, as *drawn* narrative media, that the ideas carry most weight. In many ways this combination of taxonomy and critical concept is one of two main locations where McCloud exceeds Groensteen in offering us ideas to negotiate the comics form. His argument, however tenuous in places, remains a highly useful tool for analysis.

While McCloud presents his ideas as a universal representational system, an argument that is impossible to sustain across cultures, his points around this warrant further attention.¹³⁶ He suggests that the less detail a given character or object has, the greater amount of real objects it can be related to. The key example is the human face. If a character has a lot of specific features intricately depicted, although we may appreciate the richness and definition, we will not be able to see ourselves represented in the character as much as we will with one which has minimal features.

Jordana Greenblatt explicitly links this process to characterisation and a nuanced take on identification through a psycho-analytic idea of the 'universal Child':

In explaining how the simplified cartoon face performs a generalizing function that facilitates identificatory relationships, Scott McCloud associates the generality of the cartoon with, among other aspects, its "childlike features" (36). While McCloud initially ties this to our early childhood fascination with cartoons, he later claims that "storytellers in *all* media know that a sure indicator of *audience involvement* is the degree to which the audience *identifies* with a story's *characters*" and that "*viewer-identification* is a specialty of *cartooning*" (42, emphasis in original). Although McCloud's framing of the markers of success of a given text is excessively

¹³⁶ Many others agree with this position see for instance Jeff Miller:
comics (like all forms of human communication) are meaningful only in accordance with a system of rules that readers learn through their culture. Further, these rules are invested with ideological commitments and therefore encourage a particular understanding of the elements in a comic strip (and through it, of the world) while ignoring or discouraging others. McCloud fails to recognize that the meanings we derive from dots and lines on a page are far less a product of those particular marks than they are of the rules we take for granted when we read them. He proposes that we should take cartoons simply at face value, as though their meanings were perfectly natural.

Jeff Miller 'Contesting *Understanding Comics*' (1998) available at
<http://web.archive.org/web/20050311033039/http://www.dreamscape.com/jsmiller/mccloud.htm> last
accessed 16 Feb 2010

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generalizing (many readers and audiences connect with many texts in ways that are not at all dependent on identification), the centralizing function that he attributes to childlike features is not without its significance. The Child, through its position as the centre of our social nexus of interpretation and identification, can, perhaps, either be called into question *through* the technical workings of a graphic narrative or it can serve to validate a particular strategy of interpretation — to ease our logical and ideological transition between frames.¹³⁷

McCloud suggests the epitome of this technique is the character of Tintin by the Belgian Hergé (see figure 5): a banal character often drawn against a rich background. A look in detail at one of the commentators on the issue of Tintin's “blankness” will be useful to support Greenblatt's thesis and fully explore what is at stake in McCloud's suggestion.

Tom McCarthy places the minimalism of Tintin at the core of his argument about Hergé and the literary (drawing in part on French comics commentators and Hergé himself):

Tintin is... 'hollow at the core'. 'An empty hero' Tisseron calls him, 'void of all identity'; 'a blank domino', writes Serres, 'the empty and transparent circle'. The 'zero degree of typeage', he is also the zero degree of character, of history, of life itself. Beautiful, seductive, he is, like Balzac's Castrato, the vanishing point of all desire. The black dots of his eyes are the opposite of every sun, his skin the anti-type of any colour. Tintin is pure negative, the whiteness of the whale, the sexlessness of the unconsummated marriage, the radical erasure of the Khamsin... Even his name contains a deadly repetition: Tin-tin... nothing, generalised collapse of all economies.¹³⁸

What McCarthy is describing is McCloud's idea of universal representation. Tintin, his name itself translating as “nothing” is an example *in extremis*. Because his denotative

¹³⁷ Jordana Greenblatt 'I for Integrity: (Inter)Subjectivities and Sidekicks in Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*' *Image-Text* Vol 4 Issue 3 (2008) paragraph 5, available at http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v4_3/greenblatt/ last accessed 29 April 2010

¹³⁸ Tom McCarthy *Tintin and The Secret of Literature* (London: Granta Books, 2006) p. 161. The Khamsin is a desert wind that erases all tracks and reconfigures the topography of the desert in powerful gusts. McCarthy's hyperbole here is suggesting that Tintin is the erasure of erasure – beyond the elemental to a metaphysical negation of character.

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signification is minimal, a round face with two dots (and a quiff), when McCarthy says that his character is the collapse of all economies, what he is indicating is an absence of connotative signification – a face which does not connote can denote any face at all.¹³⁹ The suggestion is that Tintin does not communicate beyond the generalised notions of what he is supposed to represent: that is a male hero. This is quite wrong. I would argue that the Belgian journalist goes beyond this simple idea of a generalised protagonist and in a revealing manner: Tintin's presumed connotative nothingness reveals the binary privileges implicit in the assumed readership of the comics. He is white, not black; he is male, not female; he is middle (or even upper) class; slim not rotund; young not old. That Tintin can be seen as a kind of 'zero degree of typeage' (Hergé's own words referring to Barthes's 'zero degree of literature') reveals the very cultural orientation of what McCloud claims is universal. He is not "anyone" but any middle-class, white male. That stated, the process of reduction of detail to emphasise the general over the specific is one of three main ways that many comics draw the reader into the narrative and it *is* very effective in the Tintin comics.¹⁴⁰ McCarthy uses the word 'economy' deliberately, implicitly referencing the three main theoretical sources for his study – Derrida, Barthes and Bataille. With it, he suggests an evacuation of desire, of meaning and thus of process. Far from being the 'collapse of all economies' Tintin is a catalyst which enables the narrative to revolve around the reader, becoming quite the opposite. Tintin in this reading becomes the end of signification and thus the end of *différance*: a term Derrida coined to explain the inability to distinguish

¹³⁹ See McCloud 1993 op cit. For his reference to Tintin see p. 42

¹⁴⁰ This is a technique unique to fictitious images; it requires something not to be an attempt to represent an object actually in the world. Nevertheless other media do use banality in the same way – in film we could identify hero-characters that do the same or in literature first person narratives can often play a similar role in enticing the reader. What I am emphasising here is the way in which comics achieve this, rather than trying to argue that reader involvement is something unique to comics. Patently it is not.

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between the deferral in time and space in the sign and the differing of the thing from its sign.

Yet this comparison between a character in comics and a vacuous end of signification is too simple, and McCarthy acknowledges it as such, doing a fast about turn and adding that Tintin is also the 'enabler of all economies as well'¹⁴¹. For McCarthy, that act of enabling is: 'Silencing, he [Tintin] allows the spectacle, the deal, the whole caboodle to continue by keeping its unspoken just that: unspoken.... Guardian of the silence at the heart of noise' and thus an absence of signification that allows the process to take place around it: that is, the atemporal, asignifying constant that permits *différance* to occur. Yes, Tintin is what enables this, but rather than the catalyst for it, he is making *différance* in comics explicit, in that instead of keeping secrets, he offers them up to the one absolute uncertainty (and certainty) in any text: the reader. Tintin, far from resisting or supplementing *différance*, actually embodies it. Derrida states that his paradoxical term requires us to:

think *simultaneously*, on the one hand, *différance* as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that has been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and on the other hand, *différance*, as the relation to an impossible presence, an expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that disrupts every economy¹⁴²

Tintin, as the reader's entrance into the text, bridges Derrida's dichotomy in a way that is characteristic of a technique common to many comics: involving the reader directly by reduction of visual detail. We can see this clearly in figure 6.

¹⁴¹ McCarthy op cit p162

¹⁴² Jacques Derrida 'Différance' in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1991) p. 72

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The extract is from *The Castafiore Emerald*, a strange, circular mystery story full of misreadings, mistakes and ultimately very little action. It fascinates McCarthy and he cites it as 'Hergé's masterpiece'.¹⁴³ It is a domestic drama centred on Captain Haddock's ancestral home at Marlinspike, and thus unlike in many other adventures Tintin's role is mainly as an observer to the action: his whole concept preventing him from becoming directly emotionally involved in the action. I have chosen to use this particular Tintin book, as the difference between a story such as this and an adventure story that drags the reader through a speedy tour of a fictional South American country (such as *Tintin and the Picaros* where the readers experience of the depicted environment is as important as the plot) provides a less immediate example and would require more extensive “quotation” of a comic than the “society” narrative given here.

The page reproduced shows an encounter between Captain Haddock and gypsies camping on a rubbish dump close to Marlinspike Hall. Haddock moves through various emotional states as he first speaks to a fortune teller, a young gypsy family and an elderly man. The gypsies are one red herring among many in the book and the page foreshadows much that will happen in the rest of the story, not least the theft of the jewels and the association between the gypsies and the police. What is interesting here for my purposes is Tintin's apparent redundancy in the entire scene. He is in every panel, and yet speaks only once and has no effect whatsoever on the proceedings. Yet the impact of his presence is pronounced, he gives each panel a focus and his characteristically straightforward facial expressions guide our response to the conversations. Without Tintin to support him, Haddock would seem erratic in the fast-moving, emotional shifts that occur throughout the

¹⁴³ McCarthy op cit p102

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page. Tintin's presence and his reactions humanise the Captain and give the scene a fluidity it would otherwise lack. He serves no purpose but to guide the reader and in a sense be the reader, positioning them just behind Haddock's shoulder in the conversations. He is, in effect, the reader's point of view.

This interpretation is reinforced by the one line he speaks. 'I'm glad you could help them' specifies this role precisely. If the Gypsies are a red herring in the plot, they are also a cornerstone of the ethical message Hergé is trying to get across. Likewise, if Tintin is the reader's physical manifestation in the narrative, he also guides our relationship to its ethics. The gypsies are victims of a continuing undercurrent of prejudice throughout the comic: Haddock prior to meeting them calls them 'guttersnipes' and thinks they are 'attracted by the stink [of a rubbish dump]'; his butler refers to them as 'nothing but a bunch of thieving rogues'; and Thomson and Thompson assume the gypsies have stolen Castafiore's emerald 'without a shadow of a doubt'.¹⁴⁴ Thus, Tintin's simply spoken line puts the reader at odds with the prejudice against the Romany from the very beginning of the comic. He is not simply our visual focus, but also our ethical centre in the text. This is effective as a consequence of both his physical appearance and his character's lack of depth.

Tintin and characters like him (for instance Animal Man who we will look at shortly) in comic books occupy a special position in relation to conventional theories of the sign because their primary referent is the reader as *imagined* by the text. For instance while Tintin is ostensibly the hero, as McCarthy emphasises, the comics are more often than not *about* Captain Haddock. Tintin positions the reader in relation to the actions around them:

¹⁴⁴ Hergé *The Castafiore Emerald* trans. Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner (London: Mammoth, 1973) pp. 1, 12, 47

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as listening to Haddock or Calculus, befuddling Thompson and Thomson, or being imprisoned in various different and complicated ways with the prison being the star of the show. Tintin gives the reader a position within the text that relates to its actual content (the other characters and the shifts and intricacies of the plot). He is not so much a character as a formal device. He is the imagined reader: the means by which the text unfolds. The requirements for such a device in comics are both formal and historical – indeed they are both at the same time. When we look in detail at *2000AD* and in particular the characters of Sam Slade and Halo Jones we will see how a different artist implements a similar effect, albeit *stylistically* very different to Hergé's *ligne claire* both by the scale of McCloud's triangle, and by the cultural assumptions made about their readership. The need for ease of engagement with a comic, and its significance as part of the formal development of comics, comes from a history of serialisation. In a weekly strip (as both the examples from *2000AD* and *Tintin* – as originally conceived - were) the reader needs an explicit place to jump into the text as it cannot be guaranteed that they have not “skipped a week” or even that they could remember much of the character.

Simple characters serve a practical purpose, but they also highlight a formal process that goes on in comics. On the one hand the character as imagined reader becomes the pivot by which pleasure and the presence of the text is possible: within texts such as these it is the structural conceit that enables reading to occur; on the other hand it is the loss of the self in the text a movement from the reader as observer *of the text* and the reader as observer *in the text*. The closest comparable technique in other media would be the use of the second person in fiction – a very difficult technical feat of writing. Thus, the reader character is a fusion of text and reader that creates a cycle of textuality limited only by the reader's

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decision to put down the comic in front of them. This experience of the comics-character-as-reader is contingent on the ability of the reader to make the connection between themselves and their character-host based on their relative identification with the denotative features of the character's depiction (the minimal the better: in the case of Tintin white, skinny, middle-class, male; in the case of Halo Jones – as we will see – white, female, working class and of uncertain sexual orientation), and the extent to which the character fits their personal 'mythology' of themselves, actual or fantastical. This creates a liminal space where the effect's functions are imperfect and specific to the idiosyncrasies of individual readers. It is here that such characters relate to *différance*: the reader is at once their self and not their self, present in the text and removed. Thus, Tintin is the sign of the reader – that which attempts to make the reader present, and by proxy the sign of the reader's non-presence, the necessary resort to minimalism demonstrating the impossibility of the reader in the text.

Approximately we can say this is an aspect of *différance* or alternately that the movement between reader and text occurs not only in the physical space between eye and page, but in a conceptual space between a referent and its absence, between a connection between things in the world and things in the mind. The looser the connection, the less encumbered the fiction. As Carrier puts it: 'Comics are about their audience, we readers who project into them our desires'.¹⁴⁵ So far from a silence at the heart of textuality, such a technique, used effectively, is the mark of the vast and noisy world of the reader penetrating the fiction, rupturing its silence, giving voice to its secrets, not keeping them.

¹⁴⁵ Carrier op cit p. 92

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This is not unique to Tintin as McCloud demonstrates. The function of involvement through reduction of detail is common to many comics. It is also not something that remains within the bounds of single characters. Simplistic drawing can create involvement not simply by the dissolution of specific characters but by a general refraction of representational detail. Moreover individual artists' styles have an additional impact on this effect that while categorisable can only be responded to in their work with due respect to its idiosyncrasies.

Groensteen has a slightly different take on this stylistic effect. On the one hand he recognises its importance, but on the other has reservations about its effects. Rather than acknowledging McCloud's idea that it is a method of engaging the reader, instead he connects what he calls 'typification' to a limited version of the object precedent and sees in it an ethical conundrum:

The abbreviation of a character to several pertinent lines assures their characterisation and their immediate identification. Tintin's tuft and the cap and earring of Corto Maltese [a character by influential Italian creator Hugo Pratt] are among the most celebrated emblems of this graphic strategy. Typification presents a danger: that of stereotype, that answers to the necessity of fully visually expressing something through "exterior signs" (or clues – richness, honesty, deceit, etc.) that are simple and easily decodable.¹⁴⁶

Typification is explicitly linked to another of Groensteen's concepts, 'anthropocentrism', that he argues is prevalent in comics. This is the privilege given to 'the agent of the action': in McCloud's conceptual framework the figurative reader (in a literal sense – the reader as drawn).¹⁴⁷ In this, Groensteen seems to be misaligning concepts to produce a moral dilemma when in fact there is none. In aligning typification with anthropocentrism what he

¹⁴⁶ Groensteen op cit p. 162

¹⁴⁷ Ibid p. 161

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is doing is forcing the issue of precedence in with the mechanisms for engaging the reader. Tintin's quiff is to distinguish him from McCloud's most extreme universal, the smiley face. It renders Tintin specific, and thus recognisably distinct throughout the narrative, whilst retaining that “universal” appeal. We have already noted how these reductions are also culturally orientated. The stereotype which worries Groensteen is a necessary product of cultural norms and practices as represented in the text. Signifiers of moral attributes, such as rubbing your hands to signify greed, are not in themselves ethically problematic. It is their attribution that can become so: e.g. a greedy Jew rubbing his hands.

In his description of typification, Groensteen amalgamates two processes which need to be conceptually distinguished. The first is what I have termed the object precedent, which, along with stylistic consistency, is one of the necessary guarantors of narrative coherence in comics. The second, simplification, coming from McCloud, is what can draw the reader in, and is often combined with anthropocentrism, which is almost universal in comics.¹⁴⁸ While we can argue that these techniques are culturally orientated: Tintin, the white young male, is a visual descriptor of the “zero degree” comics reader in his cultural context; we cannot argue that these uses thus carry a moral connotation beyond that. To create a comic outside of culture is conceptually impossible, so it is important to identify these moments without moralising them. They will be present in every text regardless of techniques used.

Comics as made objects are always within culture: they are a created simulation of a world: the drawing is always a fiction and like all fictions it relies on a complicit and *active*

¹⁴⁸ Anthropocentrism also covers the use of anthropomorphic characters for example animals in Disney comics or aliens in *2000AD*.

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reader. Other media deal with this in different ways, but the comic, through visually presenting something that is not and has never actually been, (a drawing is never an object other than a drawing) has found ways in which to draw in its readers and turn static pictures into an effective narrative. With a lack of obvious ways to show movement in a way that engages the reader without overly heavy recourse to explanatory text, the greatest challenge faced by comics has been to draw the reader into the story, and imagining their readers and creating protagonists in their image is one example of how comics achieve this.

Panel Transitions, Closure and “Meaning” in Comics

Reader involvement helps us make sense of another important part of the comics experience by providing us with a specific way of understanding how we relate to each individual panel as part of a sequence and thus as a concept it enables us to understand how we turn juxtaposed images into narrative. Both Groensteen and McCloud call this 'closure', a process by which we take limited information and create something richer, more intense than the sum of its parts: 'a silent dance of the seen and the unseen' that is movement between text(seen) and experience(unseen).¹⁴⁹ It also occurs in individual panels as we make sense of that moment's action in the context of the wider sequence. What is at stake here is a very different relation to time and movement than that found in other media, for instance as provided abstractly in language or through the provision of a mechanical representation of time in film. Hatfield sees this as fundamental to expressing comics 'otherness', that they are not: 'mechanically paced, hence... “passive” forms of visual communication' and this is why it is important that we follow McCloud when 'he privileges [comics'] static nature – more precisely the way they exploit the “juxtaposition” of still images.'¹⁵⁰ Instead of the cinematic apparatus (or the verb) providing the “action”; the reader does.

When broached in terms of narrative, this difference becomes a question of meaning. Meaning can still be seen in individual objects so long as they occur once and do not have any wider effect on the story line; but, as we saw in the discussion of the object

¹⁴⁹ McCloud 1993 op cit p. 91

¹⁵⁰ Hatfield op cit p. 33

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precedent earlier in this chapter, nearly all objects in comics exist within a continuum of other images and thus only attain their *narrative* function through change and repetition. Much of this section will concentrate on exploring how meaning is different in a medium that struggles with representing these two essential aspects of narrative (time and movement) without recourse to the work-around of descriptive text as we saw in the McCay example earlier.

Even when we see something in comics reduced to the extent that its material structures are so simple as to be comprised of a minimal number of lines on paper, we still learn to interpret those lines as an object that can be understood as part of a narrative. David Lewis suggests that we understand pictures in such a way that we can translate completely into language giving them a “meaning” function equivalent to that of the verbal:

unless there are special circumstances of ambiguity or obscurity, the pictures in picturebooks deliver up their meaning directly. When I turn the pages of, say, *Lady Muck* [a children's picture book about a pig], I see pictures of pigs and parts of pigs in various positions and from various angles. If I am asked, “What do you see?” I might say, “I see a pig rubbing its rump against a tree”, or alternatively, ‘I see a picture of a pig rubbing its rump...’. What I am unlikely to say is, ‘I see an arrangement of lines and colours as a picture of a pig’. This of course just sounds foolish, but more is at stake here than proper or improper uses of language. The sentences do not just dress up the experience in more or less appropriate words and phrases, they give us important clues about how we understand or misunderstand the world around us.¹⁵¹

But pictures, particularly pictures in comics, do not have a meaning in the same way as words. In fact, meaning itself is a linguistic notion. It is the idea of something standing in for something else. In linguistics, the Saussurean sign is composed of signifier (word), signified (meaning), and, for nouns at least, referent (object in the world). This triad has been expanded in cultural theory to incorporate other sorts of signs; for example those in

¹⁵¹David Lewis *Reading Contemporary Picture Books: Picturing Text* (London, New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001) p. 128

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photographs, film, and indeed comics. In these terms, Lewis would suggest that language always returns in our understanding of the picture: that is, the picture has all the semiotic elements present in the Saussurean triad. What I would argue is that this misses the key difference between a linguistic sign and a pictorial one: the linguistic sign is arbitrary while the pictorial one is not. Pictures may always have an arbitrary symbolic element and function indexically, but they are always also iconic (which words never are). While verbal language may be able to name an object in comics, say “a man” and even describe it “a plain, white man with a quiff” it cannot replicate absolutely the drawing of the man on the page. Even if the meta-language of style itself is used (for instance “in the style of *la ligne claire*” the term used to describe Hergé's style in *Tintin*) it still cannot replace the image itself, merely make reference to similarities to other images with which the reader will hopefully be familiar.

In his essay 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on some Eisenstein Stills', Barthes looks at the way in which images communicate when he describes stills taken from *Ivan The Terrible* and *Battleship Potemkin*. To understand the significance of his claim it is worth exploring his argument in this essay in full. In order of immediacy he proposes 3 levels of message found in the stills. With reference to figure 7 – the connotations of the gold, for instance wealth, the anointing of the monarch etc.; and finally the 'third meaning' or, more bluntly, the ineffable level. Barthes calls this third meaning the '*obtuse meaning*' for its difficulty, but also for its bending outside the text. He is talking, very specifically, about film stills and the possibility found within them of the filmic. That is, a property so unique to film that it cannot be described by language:

The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming

it. My reading remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation. If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything – how do you describe something that does not represent anything? The pictorial “rendering” of words is here impossible with the consequence that if, in front of these images, we remain, you and I, at the level of articulated language.. the obtuse meaning will not succeed in existing, in entering the critic's metalanguage.¹⁵²

What is specific to the medium of film, that is the filmic, is the very thing that cannot be approximated by any other form of communication. That which marks film as being other to the verbal, is irreducible to the written or spoken word.¹⁵³ In comics a similar thing occurs yet this is not obtuse, it pervades the medium. Barthes recognises this: 'I am convinced that these “arts” [comics] ...possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier (related to the obtuse meaning) ... There may be a future - or a very ancient past – truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture.'

Barthes appears to be suggesting that comics are a medium rampant with signifiers lacking signifieds; filled with content in which each discrete image's only reference is itself or the prior or future marks of itself. This is close to the object precedent as described in the second section of this chapter. It is what gives a comic coherence. It enables these processes to recur between panels and pages. It allows a character within a comic to have duration between panels and thus the object precedent in comics is one of the main marks of time. To continue to use the sign categories of C. S. Peirce, it is why the primary semiotic mode of comics' is indexical. Comics point to things, they do not attempt to contain, fix, make absolutely present: shifting from one image to another, from one present

¹⁵² Roland Barthes *Image Music Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Harper Collins, 1981) p. 61

¹⁵³ It is true that film itself can contain the spoken word. However, this is never in isolation: even against the blank screen the verbal content of a film is mediated by the images (or lack thereof) it accompanies. The same is true of the written word in comics: it is never a verbal articulation uncontaminated by surrounding images, it always communicates in conjunction with them even when the supposed purposes are disparate.

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to another in which objects recur. Indeed their iconic nature is in fact their indexical function: the image of an object in comics is usually in reference to other instances of the same object.¹⁵⁴

This process of pointing to itself enables an object to transcend the sum of its representations: to have any coherence it must do so in the mind of the reader as the sum of indexical images relating to the same object forming over the course of the comic into a coherent whole – a narrative object capable of change through the sum of its signs. Groensteen describes this process as the icon being 'plastically and semantically over-determined'.¹⁵⁵ The term coming from psychoanalysis means that a single desired effect, (in this case an object continuing between panels, or more generally the narrative) is determined by multiple causes at once.

Each panel seizes a moment that must seem to be like any other and yet be very carefully composed. Comics' images are transitional not static moments in the narrative. In repetition there is a constant process of pointing to the reader, a pointing that is also a beckoning: an invitation to take control. This is one of the key means by which the sequence of images operates: without repeated objects, comics have difficulty communicating. McCloud suggests that even in completely arbitrary juxtapositions we can still make connections, but along with David Carrier I think that this is only: 'narrowly correct, his account is misleading as a general characterization of this synthesis, or what may be called closure. Occasionally a comic may use such juxtapositions, but in practice no

¹⁵⁴ Richard Schiff considers this to be one of the characteristics of modernist representation: 'the indexical function has been privileged over the iconic'. "Cezanne's Physicality: The Politics of Touch," in *The Language of Art History* ed. S. Kemal and I. Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) p. 139 quoted in Carrier op cit p. 89

¹⁵⁵ Groensteen op cit p.18

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narrative could develop unless *most* transitions were relatively straightforward'.¹⁵⁶ Thus comics nearly always contain similar objects or scenes or anticipate them - thus working within the remit of the object precedent. In agreement, Umberto Eco suggests that we cannot help but make a narrative from related images.

In his essay 'A Reading of Steve Canyon', Eco describes what he calls the '*montage rules*' of comics: 'the montage in comics is different from a film, which merges a series of stills into a continuous flux. The comic strip on the other hand, breaks up the story's *continuum* into a few essential components. Obviously the reader welds these parts together in his [sic] imagination and then perceives a continuous flow'.¹⁵⁷ Eco goes on to describe a study by Evelline Sullerot in which readers were presented with two images of a man facing a firing squad. According to this study: 'the subjects of the test tended to describe an imaginary third frame showing the condemned man falling to the ground'.¹⁵⁸ The point being made here is clear: in taking two fragments of an event (in this case two photographs), readers construct a narrative, and this narrative, although communicated through language in the act of its description, is non-verbal (the imaginary third image). This runs counter to assertions made by many commentators on textuality, from people dealing with specific media (David Lewis), to more general theorists like Julia Kristeva who argues: 'For it is in language that all signifying operations are realized (even when linguistic material is not used), and it is on the basis of language that a theoretical approach

¹⁵⁶ Carrier op cit p. 89

¹⁵⁷ Umberto Eco 'A Reading of Steve Canyon' in *20th Century Studies* Issue 15/16 December 1976 (Kent: Scottish Academic Press, 1976) pp. 19-33

¹⁵⁸ Ibid p. 31 See Eveline Sullerot *La Presse Feminine* (Paris: Colin 1963) with thanks to Domingos Isabellino on comixschl mailing list 'Re: Eco Sources' 7 October 2010

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may attempt to perceive that operation'.¹⁵⁹ The argument that all narrative resides in language always takes the form of an assertion. It lacks evidence from the texts.

Carrier suggests that this position of verbal dominance in the field of meaning is a recent shift in the philosophical discipline of aesthetics from the idea of thought being a visual entity to a verbal one. I would suggest that comes more directly from the privileged position of book based learning in twentieth century education. Thought is a socio-cultural activity, no matter how private it is, we can learn to think in very different ways depending on what we are exposed to: verbally, visually, cinematically or any combination of the above. Authors make the mistake of assuming that the process itself is linguistic because in critiquing narratives we *describe* the processes linguistically (even the narratives found within the psyche – the psycho-analytic couch being the location of a privileged storytelling). The description is being mistaken for the thing.¹⁶⁰ Comics as indicated by Eco, suggest differently.

McCloud uses the example of a murder to demonstrate how the reader takes control of the action in the comics. In figure 8, we see a man at the back right of the panel wielding an axe and yelling 'Now you DIE!!!' in the bottom left a terrified second figure raises his hands in fear and answers 'No! NO!'. The second panel shows us a night sky with the text 'eeYAA' emblazoned across it. This example makes explicit a process that happens in all sequences in comics.

The process, as described by McCloud, is that readers must individually complete

¹⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva 'Revolution in Poetic Language' in *The Portable Kristeva* ed. Kelly Oliver (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997) p. 58

¹⁶⁰ I am not arguing that comics are not a sign system - that they resist semiotics entirely. Instead I'm suggesting that comics function in a way entirely other to a conventional semiology extrapolated from linguistics. What constitutes "doing" in a linguistic code is signified very differently in comics.

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the action between the panels. As McCloud says: 'To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths'¹⁶¹ : there are several different outcomes that could be represented by these two panels. The most obvious ambiguity is the unattributed scream. Different readers will assign it either as a scream of glee by the murderer or as the death cry of the murdered. Language can give us an example of what happens and can point out the ambiguity, but therein lies the very the thing that it cannot realise: the fact remains that however the murder is interpreted it remains unique to the reader, any verbal description of what happens between the panels is only one interpretation. The ambiguity exists in the analysis not the reading. Between the two panels, the reader constructs an “imaginary third” and that is where the action takes place. For some readers the murder might not even take place (that was my first reaction), and the scream could be a scream of fear as the victim somehow manages to flee. This example presents a heightened uncertainty of action, as there are no successive or preceding panels to indicate either the relationship (or lack thereof) of the two men or the outcome of the scene. In any reading something occurs between the panels: it just cannot be fixed simply with a description unless presented as entirely subjective.

The different possibilities outlined above are however limited through the progress of McCloud's gloss. The text is itself a comic and it resolves the question of the murder happening through the continued explanation of the example: 'You participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot' we are told. So even if in the reading of the example we wanted the character to escape, the sub-narrative of the murder forms part of the wider argument of the comic, which thus negates the possibility of the victim

¹⁶¹ McCloud op cit 1993 p. 69

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surviving. This is a common technique and one that we saw in the analysis of the police hat in *God's Man* earlier in the thesis.

Yet one ambiguity remains and cannot be easily resolved. That is the provenance of the scream. For Carrier this represents a lack of skill on the creator's part: 'When rather, the artist's image is visually ambiguous – capable of more than one plausible interpretation – then he or she has failed to communicate.'¹⁶² Ambiguities of this sort are rampant in comics and are often never resolved. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*, arguably one of the most important works in comics history, is constantly ambiguous as Campbell's scratchy style means characters may be easily mistaken for one another, reinforcing the anonymity of the Victorian slums.¹⁶³ Comics often tread a fine line between leaving ambiguity open to reader interpretation and the need to develop a coherent narrative.

Groensteen adds to the transition from panel to panel an awareness of the larger mechanics of the page and narrative. He argues that while the panel is the base unit of comics it is in a constant relation with the other elements of the text: these being the 'hyperframe' or full page, the balloons and text boxes, the discrete "strip" of panels and the overarching structure of the comic the 'multiframe'. Groensteen argues that all these elements collaborate to structure the reading process and guide the reader's passage through the comic. Simple techniques such as linking panels through speech balloons or emphasising the first and last image on a page help to keep pace and narrative flow. Hatfield identifies similar elements, but rather than posit them as part of the essential unity

¹⁶² Carrier op cit p. 14

¹⁶³ Alan Moore (w), Eddie Campbell (a) *From Hell* (London: Knockabout Comics, 2008)

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of an effective comic, he sees them as functioning in tension with one another. Any theory of comics, he states:

must grapple with four tensions that are fundamental to the art form: between *codes* of signification [images and words]; between the *single image* and the *image-in-series*; between narrative sequence and page *surface*; and, more broadly, between reading-as-*experience* and the text as material *object*.¹⁶⁴

Tensions between different elements of comics are always present in that the reader looks at several things at once and this brings out an element of choice. Hatfield sees this as key to reader engagement and part of the uniqueness of comics:

From a reader's viewpoint, comics would seem to be radically fragmented and unstable. I submit that this is their great strength: comic art is composed of several kinds of *tensions*, in which various ways of reading – various interpretative options and potentialities- must be played against each other. If this is so, then comic readers must call upon different reading strategies or interpretative schema, than they would in the reading of a conventional written text.¹⁶⁵

The difference here between Hatfield and Groensteen can be reduced to their relative privileging of creator and reader. Tension doesn't always function as an appropriate term for the reading experience and nor are comics consistently “unified”. In fact, the emphasis on tension does not hold in Hatfield's own close analysis. Rather than being a consistent, universal aspect of comics as an art form these tensions are relative to a text. In his detailed analysis of *Heartbreak Soup* by Gilbert Hernandez, Hatfield states: 'repetitions in both dialogue and composition ease the image/series tension and allow us to see these drastic shifts [in time and place] as part of a predictable, indeed inevitable, process.'¹⁶⁶ Thus the level of tension is relative to the text rather than a constant in comics generally.

¹⁶⁴ Hatfield op cit p. 36

¹⁶⁵ Ibid p. 36

¹⁶⁶ Ibid p. 97

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Likewise the unity that Groensteen puts forward is one that presupposes a kind of reading that can freely flit around the page and make sense of the elements on it in ways other than the prescribed spatio-topical arrangements would suggest. There is a movement within any given text between how the page is organised, and the freedom of the reader to interpret the page. Both may combine to produce the reading. The best example of the way these ideas have been negotiated is in a story from Grant Morrison, Chas Truog and Doug Hazlewood's run on DC Comic *Animal Man*. Morrison is a Scottish writer who can be seen as one of the key creators who moved from British to US comics publishing. While his work is highly politically aware, it is his radical use of the comics form for analysis of itself that is of interest here. 'At Play in the Fields of the Lord' and 'A New Science of Life' are the opening stories to the collection *Deus Ex Machina* and were originally published in December 1989 and January 1990.¹⁶⁷

These two stories focus on a peyote trip that Buddy (aka Animal Man) and a Native American physicist called James Waterman take at the top of a mesa in the Arizona desert. The story moves between Morrison writing the story of the comic at his word processor and the trip in which his characters become aware of their own fictional status. It reaches a climax as the reader themselves is addressed. This movement from writer to characters to reader embraces the continuum of a critical analysis: the producer, the text itself, its audience. While the other aspects are developed further in the storyline: Buddy confronts his own status as a comic book character and eventually meets the writer himself in the

¹⁶⁷ Grant Morrison (w), Chas Truog(a), Doug Hazlewood(a) *Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina* (New York: DC Comics, 2003) Morrison was part of the second wave of 2000AD artists to make the transition to American comics and his work explicitly builds on the that of the earlier generation of writers and artists on the comic and the comics that creators such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons had published in the US market. As such the following close analysis is of a comic that had evolved out of the work we will look at in more detail later in the thesis.

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world of the comic; it is the way in which the reader is approached in this segment that is of primary interest here.

As the peyote trip begins, a regular panel structure with discrete frames is broken by the start of hallucinations that move outside the panel boundaries. Steadily the psychedelic content of the visions come to structure the pages. Rather than through the external world in which the characters sit, the comic moves into the internal realm of their hallucinations. Instead of presenting hallucinations simply as objects within panels, the panels become part of the hallucinations. Despite the loss of traditional panel boundaries the pages are still organised according to a form of regular gridding: the patterns for this become more complex as the trip progresses and then as we get to the climax of the drug sequence they revert to a grid two across and three down per page. The structure of the comic draws the reader into the minds of the characters as their trip changes, the panels reflect their mental condition and thus the reading process becomes more chaotic as it mirrors the characters' confused states of mind. This is an attempt to simulate hallucination and eventually to expose the hallucinatory nature of comics themselves by demonstrating to the reader their own presence and agency in the text.¹⁶⁸

As this moves to a climax all extraneous imagery is stripped away. Figure 9 shows Buddy's confrontation with an earlier incarnation of Animal Man. The “fictional” Animal Man attempts to warn Buddy that we, the readers, are watching him and then vanishes into thin-air to be replaced by the voice of the writer. As Buddy slowly turns around as per the author's instructions he looks directly at the reader in a splash page and shouts 'I can see

¹⁶⁸ This sequence builds explicitly on a section from Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and John Totleben's *Swamp Thing* that we will look at in chapter 6

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you!' This is the critical process reduced to its bare essentials. Present in the text are the writer, the fictional characters, and the reader, and all of them meet. Of course, the *actual* reader and writer are not present on the page but fictionalised versions: yet the effect is uncanny.

In the full page spread Buddy appears to be looking directly at the reader, addressing them in a manner that is unsettling due to the build up, his expression and the rapid change in scale. Although there is little tension between the elements, the effect is that as a reader we become acutely aware of the processes driving the comic. Prior to the page sized confrontation with Buddy, panel boundaries are deliberately sketchy, when present at all, and backgrounds consist of simple colours that change in each framed panel and are absent completely where the panels aren't framed. All this serves to raise awareness of the artificiality of the story and yet keeps us engaged with the crisis that the protagonist is facing.

The comic is seeking to emphasise the anthropocentric nature of the medium. Buddy is a classic Tintinesque character (although the drawing style is very different) down to his blond quiff. He is a deliberate “everyman”: unlike many other superheroes he is married with children and balances his superheroic responsibilities with his family life. In such a way, by being both relatively mundane and visually plain, he operates as the imagined reader in the narrative: albeit with the usual cultural provisos. This is why the confrontation page is disturbing, rather than looking at a page it feels uncannily like looking in a mirror. We as readers confront our own presence in the text: the collapse of the “fourth wall” facilitated by the author-in-the-text.

If there is tension here, it is in the exploitation of the reduction of different elements

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and exposing them as artifice, yet all the different factors work together to produce the startling meeting of reader, author and character. Thus neither tension nor unity can adequately describe the process: it is fragmentary and ordered; simple and yet skilfully executed; and uses a complex framework to demonstrate the most basic of textual functions – the interaction of the reader with the text.

From the anthropocentric identification with leading characters, to the use of cultural touchstones to reward connection with images, to simplification of the pictures to allow the reader to provide the complexity: all of this points to a medium that makes unique demands of its audience whilst offering unique rewards. The emphasis on this aspect of comics warrants attention in its own right, but it is also central to the themes that will be discussed in the rest of the thesis as we see how the *2000AD* group of creators developed a sophisticated use of the techniques discussed here.

This chapter will not be the end of formal theory in the thesis. Many different techniques are put to use throughout the different comics looked at in the thesis and will be raised as and when appropriate. A full history of the medium's technical development would be counter-productive and also very hard to execute accurately. Formal development in comic books is both linear (accumulation of techniques through time) and non-linear (the moving in and out of use of various techniques as suits creators). Thus histories of form in a traditional sense will always be looping and fractious. What I present in the following chapters is not exhaustive as it shows only one movement, covering a limited selection of texts connected by a strain that I have identified. There are other, equally as important movements, and likewise other connections between the texts that have fallen out of the remit of this study. The thesis from this point in should be seen as an exercise in exploring

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one linked set of comics and the uses of different techniques that have evolved throughout the development of one strand of the medium.

Chapter 4: *2000AD* and Political Science Fiction in Early 1980s Britain

Overview

Having so far considered primarily issues of form and technical examples of reader address, these next two chapters will set out how the comics pioneered by the British came about as a response to censorship and Margaret Thatcher's revolution in government priorities. In the next two chapters I will consider three serialised stories all of which are now available as stand-alone trade paperbacks. The highest profile publication of the period was *2000AD*, and two of the stories, *RoboHunter: Play It Again Sam* and *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, were originally produced as weekly strips in that magazine. The third story (considered in chapter 5) *V for Vendetta* was initially published in 1982 in the more adult comic magazine *Warrior*, but the final chapter was not published until 1988 when it was taken up by the American publisher DC Comics.¹⁶⁹

These three comics show the way in which the political content of the comics developed along with their methods of engaging their readership. The three stories, in rough chronological order (*V*'s different publishing schedule complicates this slightly as it was started before *Halo Jones* and completed after), chart the movement from comics aimed primarily at children in *RoboHunter* to those aimed at a mixed audience of both men and women, children and adults in *Halo Jones*, and finally the much more adult *V* marking a different and parallel movement in comics, but closely related to the changes in the

¹⁶⁹ John Wagner and Alan Grant (w), Ian Gibson (a) *RoboHunter: Play it Again Sam* (Oxford: Rebellion 2005: 1982-3); Alan Moore (w), Ian Gibson (a) *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2005: 1984-1986); Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a) *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1990: 1982-8)

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medium pioneered in *2000AD*. These three stories have been selected because they have a strong connection through shared artists and authors and demonstrate how the creators developed through the period, or at least attempted to approach politics in different ways. Ian Gibson was the artist for both *RoboHunter* and *Halo Jones* and Alan Moore wrote the latter and *V for Vendetta*. They demonstrate a move from political satire in *Robo Hunter*; to a resolute, but tragic resignation to the politics of the era in *Halo Jones*; to an angry political allegory in *V*; finally all three, simulate, or are at least based loosely upon different types of musical narrative.

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'Play It Again Sam': *RoboHunter* and Class Discourse

'So there I was in Brit-Cit, where the robots did all the graft and humes were on holiday fifty-two weeks a year. All except one – The name's Slade. I'm a robo-hunter. Just setting up in town and doin' okey'

Sam C. Slade *RoboHunter: Play It Again Sam*¹⁷⁰

'Have a tune upon your lips,
And a wiggle in your hips,
While you drink tea or watch TV
Or eat your fish chips

With a song we can create
A harmonious British State!
Every droid and hume
say "Goodbye Gloom"-
Once more make Britain Great!'

[Sung to the tune of Whistle While You Work]

'And remember if you don't sing you could face heavy fines or imprisonment.'

Prime Minister Iron Aggie in 'Play It Again Sam: A Comic Opera'¹⁷¹

Except for Kidd, the forty year old sadist trapped in the body of a one year old, Sam C. Slade is the only working human in Brit-Cit. Sentient robots do everything from running the police force and the government to playing the spectator sports that remain popular. Humans are on a 52 week holiday and for the most part seem content. Slade is a robo-hunter - a private investigator specialising in robot cases- drawn in part from classic detective set ups *à la* Raymond Chandler, in part from the character of Rick Deckard from Philip K. Dick's *Do Android's Dream of Electric Sleep?*; he dresses like a futuristic version of a fantasy barbarian with a golf visor, and smokes, talks and looks like Clint Eastwood in

¹⁷⁰ Wagner, Grant and Gibson op cit unnumbered pages

¹⁷¹ Ibid unnumbered pages

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The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (it has also been suggested that the models for his character are Ted Danson and Humphrey Bogart).¹⁷² As much as Slade is a construct of popular references with little real substance of his own, so is his world an inconsistent mix of references to Britain in the 1980s.

RoboHunter 'Play It Again Sam' is perhaps the paradigmatic strip of the early period of *2000AD*. Combining humour, multi-layered political content, confusing robot metaphors and an emerging dual address, this strip demonstrates the thematic density, anarchic sensibility and idiosyncratic approach that made *2000AD* so successful. It was written by Alan Grant and John Wagner and illustrated in distinctive cartoony style by Ian Gibson. Running from November 1981 to March 1982 in weekly 3-6 page slots, "Play It Again Sam: A Comic Opera" details the story of an attempted rebellion by the Human League against the ruling robots. The uprising leads to the internment of all humans in concentration camps, before finally ending with the status quo restored. Sam Slade takes the roles of private eye, thuggish vigilante, assassin, concentration camp escapee, master robo-mechanic and finally national hero during the course of the action. The story is written as a 'comic book opera', but the songs and music are embedded in the logic of the narrative in that they are recognised as music by the characters in the story, this is unlike in a traditional musical or opera where the music is usually part of the narrative technique rather than a feature in the narrative itself. Furthermore, the tone of the musical element is closer to a traditional music hall variety show than to the more high-brow connotations made by

¹⁷² 'Sam Slade' *Wikipedia Website* available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Slade date accessed 20/7/07; for cultural references see for instance Raymond Chandler *Playback* (New York: Ballantine, 1980); Sergio Leone *The Good, The Bad, The Ugly* (MGM: 1966); and Philip K. Dick *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (London: Gollanz, 2007: 1968)

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the comic's proclamation that it is "an opera".

The whole story is enmeshed in explicit references to contemporary politics and historical events. Margaret Thatcher is prominent as Iron Aggie the robo-prime minister - 'Tough-but fair!'¹⁷³ (figure 10) - and is assassinated by Slade, only to be brought back to life by him; the Human League dwells on issues such as the indignity of unemployment and the effect of mechanisation on skilled manual labour; and the League's conflicts with the police also bring into play issues of race that would have arisen around the Toxteth and Brixton Riots of 1981 or alternately fears of a resurgence of right-wing nationalism as a response to unemployment (figures 11 and 12). The racist connotations are associated with the robots as well: the home secretary, the mastermind behind all the drama, is Sir Oswald Modroid (an explicit reference to British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley who had died in 1980) and the concentration camps for humans in the last third of the run emphasise this connection. The gas chambers are not actually present, but they are implied in a song sung by rats and other vermin that inhabit in the camps (figure 13).

The story is also heavily laden with references to both popular and traditional British culture, not least through the songs that feature at every key plot moment. There is a sense that as much as this is a comic to be read, it is also a comic that *performs* and more than this invites its readership to perform the comic. Every song in the story is footnoted with the tune that it is to be sung to. This is a specific form of reader engagement that relies upon the propensity of comics to encourage the reader to actively construct the narrative.

The musical theme goes further than the songs "sung" throughout the comic: the name of the vigilante group set up to destroy robots, The Human League, is a reference to

¹⁷³ Wagner, Grant and Gibson op cit unnumbered

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the band of the same name. Not only does their synth heavy style match the setting of the comic, but the band named themselves after a 1974 science fiction board game called 'StarForce: Alpha Centauri' in which a faction attempts to free itself from its overbearing Earth masters.¹⁷⁴ It may be that this is not an intentional reference, but it does support the general mood of the comic.

The chaos and the density of these references and techniques mean that there is no straight-forward metaphorical reading that offers itself. Nor can the comic be read as a purely mimetic narrative, that is, it cannot be read as representing a coherent story that stands on the merits of its own realism. It only works if it is read both as a narrative that relies explicitly on some knowledge of the 1980s, but also with a free acceptance that things will not follow that knowledge coherently. This is central to its mode of address. If we acknowledge that it was primarily aimed at young people, we can see how a low level of understanding of the politics is part of this mode. The BBC had run a children's news programme (*John Craven's Newsround*) during the children's television slot from 1972, so British comics writers were able to assume a basic level of political literacy: the ability to identify the Prime Minister, and an awareness of current affairs. However, the level of sophistication of the narrative was also clearly designed to appeal to older readers at a time of extreme political polarisation in the UK.

In all this, it is the humour that provides the key to the story's success. Characters such as Hoagy, Slade's imbecilic robot assistant, and Stogie his Cuban nicotine-substitute robo-cigar constantly take the edge off the dour robo-hunter. In an unusual dynamic for

¹⁷⁴ 'Human League' *Wikipedia Website* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_League accessed 11/09/06 and 'Secrets-Online: The Human League Biography' *Secrets Online Website* <http://www.league-online.com/biography1.html> accessed 11/09/06

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such a classic action hero they also actively mock him, or fawn over him to such an extent that it appears ironic. They also help to provide many of the songs that drive the narrative, these for the most part being comical. Without the humour the story would be a bland slightly strange action story and the political references would be overbearing rather than enigmatic and exploratory.

Figure 10 is the first page of the ‘Play It Again Sam’ storyline and introduces the character of Iron Aggie, Prime Droid of Brit-Cit, the futuristic megalopolis of London. Like many characters in this “neo-Britain”, Iron Aggie is a parody. But as with other parodic features in the world of Sam Slade the caricature is adapted to the purposes of the science fiction storyline. The effect of this is that while Iron Aggie bears a close relation Margaret Thatcher, she does not represent her exclusively. In fact the relationship between the “Prime Droid” and the Prime Minister contemporary to the comic’s publication is multifaceted and fluctuates between similarity and difference depending on how you chose to approach the character. Thus on a physical level we can say that the prime-droid bears visual resemblance to the real life version, but that Iron Aggie is not simply a caricature, but a character that takes has idiosyncrasies all her own, independent from the Margaret Thatcher of the early 1980s.

There are obvious ways in which this is explicit, firstly she is a robot – a conceit within the comic that is, as has been said, neither purely mimetic nor metaphorical. Robots are both physical actual robots and a way of marking a divide between two social groups in Brit-Cit: the employed and the unemployed. Furthermore there are racial connotations that become increasingly explicit as the robots incarcerate the “humes” in concentration camps

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later in the story (an event that happens for the second time in Slade's career, the first was in his inaugural run in *2000AD*).¹⁷⁵ This is significant as despite the fact that robots are supposed to be serving the "leisured" humans, in this servitude they take on all the positions of authority – from university professors, to the police force, to the office of Prime Minister. Thus, and significantly, she is different from Margaret Thatcher in that she is "built to specification": as a robot her function is to be prime minister (despite being elected – the sort of contradictory plot point the reader needs to simply accept) and rule over humans who are fundamentally of a different order of being to her, whatever symbolic connotations robots may take on. In the logic of this comic, robots signify an absolute difference to the humans along whatever lines it may be most appropriate to draw them by its readers at any given moment (both in terms of the date when the comic is being read and the specific part of the text being read).

The construction of figure 10 operates almost entirely through references and inferences. From the song from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, to the image of Aggie as Britannia, to the Bugs Bunny "That's all folks" circular panel to complete the page, the page makes sense only through the recognition of shared cultural touch-stones. This is a variation on the cultural basis of Tintin's function as a character. The reader is brought into the text through their knowledge of the generalised construction of Britishness that she evokes, singing: 'While you drink your tea or watch TV or eat your fish and chips'. All of these are immediately recognisable signifiers of Britishness repeated thousands of times in popular culture and recognisable all over the world. This is reinforced by the

¹⁷⁵ John Wagner (w) Ian Gibson and Jose Luis Ferrer (a) *RoboHunter: Verdus* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2004: 1978)

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political and patriotic symbolism of Margaret Thatcher as Iron Aggie, the political leader standing in for the state, in the loveable, quirky, yet stern school-ma'am-ish role she takes on in the comic and especially through being figured as the patriotic symbol of Britannia in the penultimate panel.

Yet reader engagement and the connotations of national identity are mediated through the shadowy figure of Slade watching Aggie's announcement on TV. Although Slade is not a direct reflection of his assumed readership as was Tintin, he starts to fulfil a similar role. He sits in front of the television drinking what we can only assume is tea, and watching the announcement on the screen. In this manner, the story is set up in two ways: firstly we are positioned as Slade watching television so we know that whoever this character turns out to be, our role in the text will be channelled through him; secondly this association with the main character who, despite his tea drinking, is in fact an American, emphasises the constructedness of this televised Britishness (or indeed of national identities altogether). Aggie's 'harmonious British state' will very shortly be revealed as anything but, and it is this first page that builds up a media version of Britain replete with patriotic symbols as a national harmony that will easily collapse.

The page structure reflects this. Following the sort of analysis Groensteen promotes will help us to understand how. Firstly the middle four panels, which contain most of the verbal content, are framed by extended panels at the top and bottom: the top interrupted by the 'Credit Card' and the bottom by the final circular panel of Iron Aggie. This distribution ensures that the televised aspect of Aggie's speech is emphasised. The bespectacled news presenter (a caricature of BBC weatherman Michael Fish) and the stylised Britannia are both clearly framed within television sets, in what Groensteen terms the 'inset', these

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embedded panels are brought to prominence by their pronounced whiteness in the monochrome colour scheme.¹⁷⁶

The middle panels, jagged and overlapping, hold the bulk of the informational content. They move between an emphasis on Aggie in the televised first panel through to the TV studio (with Aggie in it) in the second panel, before pulling back into Slade's sitting room and returning the focus to the announcement-as-media-experience just as the Prime Droid bursts into song. The layout focuses on the middle panels, and, rather than panel size being an indicator of reading duration, the page layout instead brings our attention to specific details. Thus while the top and bottom panels are significant in terms of thematically flavouring the piece, the central panels, despite being smaller, demand more of our attention.

Within this 'breakdown' (the distribution of space on the page into discrete panels) there is an additional structuring conceit: this is the 'braiding' of images throughout the page.¹⁷⁷ Two interrelated braided series are at work on this page. As well as operating to establish a precedent, these also have the effect of ordering the reader's connection to the character throughout the page. Braiding is an effect when an image or related image is repeated independently from the logic of the sequence and helps to construct the narrative or develop a theme. Braiding can occur within a page or across the entirety of a comic and like other aspects of repetition relies upon the logic of the object precedent to function.

The braiding of the separate distributions of Slade's hand and face hold the page together as a whole and maintain the focus of the reader throughout. We follow his gaze in

¹⁷⁶ Groensteen op cit p. 86

¹⁷⁷ Ibid pp. 145-6

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“watching” the television. They contrast directly: the hand, when it appears in a panel, is the focus of detail while the face is implied in the first panel and only partially revealed or in silhouette in the other two in which it appears. The two are interlaced to add a subtle but equal prominence to the figure of Aggie and the repeated embedded frame of the television set. The hand forms a line down the vertical, veering to the left hand side as hand meets face to drink tea, while the face alternates left to right. As we are sharing Slade's experience, this framing of the announcement is what gives emphasis to the reader's association with the protagonist and through the tea drinking and TV watching, the robo-hunter's own connection to the lyrics of the song. Thus, although Slade is the character watching the TV; layout, character-as-reader association and braiding help to suggest that it is the readership being addressed.

In one way this page is a plot device to explain the fact that most of the comic will take on the structure of a musical while introducing the film noir-esque Slade and creating a logical interaction with the anarchic style of the humour. In another way, it establishes the political themes and sets up the contradiction inherent in a supposedly benevolent state that wields so much easily-abused power over its population. The page does this by emphasising the last panel, marking it as entirely independent in the page layout. This panel, despite its humorous, cartoon inflection, indicates a sinister overtone to all the frivolity and jovial patriotism of song year. The emboldened emphasis in: 'If you **don't** sing you could face **fines** or **imprisonment**. That is all', suggests that far from a festival celebrating Britishness, there is a level of compulsion in this pronouncement and indeed the whole concept of song year: a rigorous authoritarianism that the story will ultimately refer to factual, historical forebears.

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The authoritarian tone could be seen to reflect leftist commentary on the political rhetoric of the time as given by Stuart Hall:

Thatcherism's search for 'the enemies within'; its operations across the lines of division and identification in social life; its construction of the respectable, patriarchal, entrepreneurial subject with 'his' orthodox tastes, inclinations, preferences, opinions and prejudices as the stable subjective bedrock and guarantee of its purchase on our subjective worlds; its rooting of itself inside a particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of 'national identity'; and its constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation – these are as central to Thatcherism's hegemonic project as the privatization programme or the assault on local democracy.¹⁷⁸

Aggie's threat to those who refuse to sing is a reflection of Thatcher's lack of patience with those who refused to conform to the project of deregulating capitalism or the social conservatism her government promoted. This, like song year, was tied up in a very specific notion of Britishness, one that was exclusive rather than inclusive. In 1981 when this first instalment was published, the socio-political conflicts and unrest that this exclusivist stance would aggravate throughout the decade were just starting to emerge. To see how it is reflected more explicitly in the comic we can look at figures 11 and 12. These show the Human League on a rampage destroying robots and, in Figure 12, their justification for the atrocity. From these two images we can see the majority of tropes that are in play at the centre of the conflict. There are several different explicit references in the images, lyrics and dialogue that position the uprising, like much of the comic, as a medley of different connected political positions and historical moments. These connotative touchstones give the League a realistic edge derived from the very pastiche that is their makeup. In a society in which the new alliances seemed to not make sense politically, the League seems to

¹⁷⁸ Hall 1988 op cit p. 8

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embody that trend as politics itself became a sort of ideological pastiche. It is worth summarising these different elements before trying to assess how the League as a whole could be interpreted.

The first panel of figure 11, the long one that fills the left hand side, shows a mob of Leaguers marching down a Brit Cit street. Their helmets resemble a combination of those of ancient Roman legionnaires and mining helmets. This matches up with the burning cross, a symbol of the Ku Klux Klan, which has a bundle of robot heads attached in a way similar to the bundle of sticks found on the Roman fasces, or rod of justice, from which Mussolini derived the word “fascist”. The mob’s weapons include stylised axes, hammers, and welding torches reinforcing the manual labour motif established by the helmets as well as building on the martial sub-theme.

And yet, despite the mixture of different references in their visual representation, the League themselves see the causes for their grievance in very simple terms. In Figure 12 we see two Leaguers explaining to a robot why they are about to destroy it, singing: 'You took our jobs, Robot! Made us slobs, Robot! You've made every hume unemployed! We've all lost our jobs to a droid! But we'll get our own back, we'll be all right Jack, once every last robot's destroyed!' Britain at the time of the comic's publication was undergoing the highest levels of unemployment since at least before the Second World War: this was partly due to the global recession, but also to do with a collapse in manufacturing exports linked to a rise in the pound and the explicit fiscal policies of the government which placed keeping inflation low a priority over full employment. Between 1978 and the beginning of

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1982 unemployment rose from 1.25 million to 2.67 million.¹⁷⁹

Popular dissent at this rise manifested itself in various ways around the country. Tensions between unions and employers, which would culminate in the Miners' strikes of the mid 1980s, were starting to become more intense as lay-offs increased and anti-union legislation was passed through parliament.¹⁸⁰ In addition, race riots were sparked by lack of opportunity as much as by an institutionally racist police force helping to fuel fears of a resurgence of the far right that had been brewing since the 1970s.¹⁸¹

All this is reflected in the iconography of the Human League. It is a hybrid between the adopted symbols of organised racism in the Ku Klux Klan and Italian fascism and the struggles of the skilled working class in an age of technological and economic change. This seemingly contradictory collage of signifiers attempts to encompass the socio-cultural impact in the 1980s of a range of different political and economic shifts. The League is not so much representative of one thing, but a manifestation of the myriad frustrations of the time.

Disaffection at unemployment and its concurrent lack of dignity seems to be focussed in two directions by the Human League: chaotically at the state and specifically at those who are seen to be complicit with the state, robots. This becomes a racist dialogue as the violence between robots and humans escalates. Thus we have the combination of working class and fascistic images, perhaps representative of establishment fears of how a populist neo-fascist movement could arise. A collapse into poverty among an established

¹⁷⁹ See David Childs *Britain Since 1945: A Political History* 6th edition (London, New York: Routledge, 2006) p. 216

¹⁸⁰ See Gamble op cit 1994 p. 125

¹⁸¹ See Dick Hebdige *Hiding in The Light* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988) p. 213

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social grouping – in this case working class whites - breeds resentment not just at the status-quo, but at those perceived to have “stolen their jobs”: immigrants, non-whites, Jews, anyone who does not conform to the construction of Britishness (tea, TV, fish and chips) set out by Aggie in Figure 10 – in this case robots.

Yet this antagonism towards both the establishment and the robots (which in places amount to the same thing) is complicated by the fact that it can also be read as connected with the race-riots spreading across the country at the time. Driven by the same frustrations as the Human League and like them, directing their anger at the police, riots had exploded in Brixton and Toxteth in 1981 and across the country in the following years. Unemployed black youths, generally more successful in education at the time than whites with a similar economic standing, took to the streets in outrage at perceived racism by the police and endemic prejudice throughout society that saw their job prospects seriously curtailed.¹⁸² In terms of an immediate reference in current affairs contemporary to the comic, these riots would be the closest thing to direct source material.

The contradictory levels of operation in the League’s symbolism suggests not simply the different inflections that can be put on a reading of the comic through its context, something that in this case must occur for it to make sense, but is an indication of how close the traditional alliances of working class Britain were to collapse. ‘Play It Again Sam’ offers a platform in which contemporary problems are presented to the reader, but cannot be dogmatically interpreted according to a specific ideological position. As the league stands for the positions of the general unemployed, racists and the rioting black

¹⁸² Kenneth Roberts ‘Youth Unemployment and Urban Unrest’ in John Benyon *Scarman and After: Essay’s Reflecting on Lord Scarman’s Report, The Riots and Their Aftermath* (Oxford: Pergammon, 1984) pp. 175-183

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communities of Brixton and Toxteth, this would be almost impossible.

Although I have been suggesting that a left-wing political message could be found in this comic, an argument could be made that an equally powerful Thatcherite reading is available. In such a reading, the authors would be suggesting that we can elide the black rioters of Brixton and the striking unionists in one entity: those that cause trouble for “decent, hardworking people”. They epitomise the nebulous 'enemy within' that Hall identifies within Thatcherite rhetoric. Yet, as we see later on, this reading is undone by the fact that the League itself is a deliberate creation of the state through the machinations of the fascistic Sir Oswald Modroid. Modroid's involvement effectively undoes that reading, but does not render the observation void. Indeed, that fact might enable a Thatcherite reading to be taken further as the “enemies within” had made it as far as the cabinet.¹⁸³

What the text seems to be saying is that where there are genuine issues within a society, if a valid solution or appropriate discourse cannot be found to deal with the problem, we cannot tell how a response will manifest or who could manipulate that sentiment for their own gains. Thus the League is an agglomeration of the possible ways early 1980s Britain could descend into violence. Yet in the science fiction setting of Brit-Cit the uncertainty around the League's metaphorical relationship to 1980s British society has no effect on proceedings; like Iron Aggie, the League is a functioning material entity whose members seem unconcerned at the semiotic confusion that their crusade evokes. Mimetically the League makes sense; metaphorically it evades a single static meaning. Nevertheless, it is their metaphoric role that gives them strength as a fictional construct.

¹⁸³ Going by reports of Margaret Thatcher's own opinions of her cabinet, that might be pretty close to how she saw it! See for instance Gamble op cit p. 129 on cabinet purges.

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The lack of a coherent political message (readers entering the text through the ever cynical Slade can empathise with robots or humans - both or neither, as they will) is in fact the strength of the comic and precisely the sort of potential text sought by Gramscian theorists in cultural studies in the 1980s:

What distinguishes the Gramscian approach is the way in which it requires us to negotiate and engage with the multiple axes of both power and the popular and to acknowledge the ways in which these two axes are “mutually articulated” through a range of populist discourses which centre by and large precisely on those pre-Post-erous modern categories: the “nation”, “roots”, the “national past”, “heritage”, “the rights of the individual” (variously) “to life and liberty”, “to work”, “to own property”, “to expect a better future for his or her children”, the right “to *be* an individual”: the “right to choose”. To engage with the popular as constructed and as lived – to negotiate this bumpy and intractable terrain – we are forced at once to desert the perfection of a purely theoretical analysis... in favour of a more “sensuous logic” - a logic attuned to the living textures of popular culture, to the ebb and flow of popular debate.¹⁸⁴

While *2000AD* can certainly be described as *popular* (the comic maintained a consistent 100,000 plus circulation until the early 1990s¹⁸⁵), it is not populist in the conventional sense. Rather it maintains a populism that is neither propagandistic nor party political, but reliant on the modes of parody and pastiche. In fact what we have seen so far in ‘Play it Again Sam’ is exemplary political satire where the reader can supply a political meaning to the confused set of connotations however he or she desires.

Pastiche and collage can be valorised as forms which enable consumers to become actual or potential producers, processors and subjects of meaning rather than the passive bearers of pre-given “messages”. Here “consumption” [i.e. reading] with its connotations of passivity, of waste, digestion, disappearance, needs to be replaced by some other term capable of conveying the *multi-accentuality* and *duration* over time and in different cultural-geographical contexts of commodified objects... treated differently by different individuals, classes, genders, ethnic groupings, invested with different types and degrees of intensity.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Hebdige 1988 op cit p. 203

¹⁸⁵ See Sabin 1993 op cit p. 61

¹⁸⁶ Hebdige 1988 op cit p. 211

The suggestion is that a black reader in Brixton would respond very differently to the Human League to a white one from a small Yorkshire mining town. Moreover, this can be reduced to an individual level as well as to that of the group. This reader from Nottingham will respond to it differently compared to her next-door neighbour and so on.¹⁸⁷

Nevertheless despite the polysemy of the references and the variety of readings that are on offer, the comic recuperates an ethical consistency through changing from an exploration of contemporary issues to a concrete look at consequences. Figure 13 shows our hero languishing in a concentration camp after a successful coup by Oswald Modroid following Slade's assassination of the Prime-Droid. Once again we have a song, this time based on the American Civil War song 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home'. Like the other songs, its presence indicates an emphasis on explanation or thematic development over the progress of the narrative. The song is a chorus of rats, fleas, lice, cockroaches, maggots and slime all describing how they will make Slade's life miserable until ultimately they kill him and 'leave his bones in an untidy heap'. The song turns out to be a dream which inspires Slade to make his escape.

I have already asserted that Slade takes on a Tintin-like role throughout the story in that he focuses the reader's attention and his behaviour is driven by events around him. While he is actively engaged in the narrative, it is only after this moment that he gains an agency of his own. This reflects the readers' own position in that before we were awash in a

¹⁸⁷ Theorists such as Derek Attridge assert that any reading of any text could be seen in a similar light as singular to each individual. To an extent, I agree with this, but that some texts either emphasise the potential for wide divergences between readers, while others restrict them. 'Play It Again Sam' does both at different points. See Derek Attridge *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

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sea of references and had to make sense of it on our own. It is in the events around figure 13 that the moral message becomes transparent through a direct reference to history.

On this page and the ones preceding it, the visual references have become steadily effaced, leaving only one. The Nazi concentration camps that are the basis for Slade's prison are the all-encompassing referent of this section of the comic. I would argue that no other reading of this moment is possible, standing it in stark contrast to the rest of the story. More specifically the largest sixth panel of the page, discretely hidden behind second and fourth, is a direct reference to the gas chambers: the whole song a sop to the fact that the light-hearted tone of the comic book would be unable to describe the horrors of a concentration camp in an explicitly graphic way. If there is any doubt, the final panel shows the now silhouetted corpse of Slade being carried off by a troop of rats.

Critical theorists such as Derek Attridge, or Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* seek to explore the ultimately subjective experience in a text (be it a novel, a photograph or comic book). Concepts such as Barthes' 'punctum' or Attridge's 'singularity' argue that the uniqueness of a reader's experience of a text will always remain mysterious to the critic unless it is their own subjective interpretation that they expound. In these critical frameworks, the moment of pure subjectivity becomes the privileged point of interaction between reader and text in an experience of culture.¹⁸⁸

While this is a significant part of the job of the critical theorist: to look for the radically indecipherable, there is also the other side of the role which is to identify moments of singular interpretation: that is, moments when only one reading is valid. This does not mean that subjective accounts are void, but that at a given moment in cultural history (as in

¹⁸⁸ Attridge op cit and Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape 1982)

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the now of the critic's writings) a text (or part of a text) can only have one ethical interpretation. In the case of the Sam Slade story this is that the teleology of prejudice is murder.

Slade as reader-in-the-text gives us a privileged position in his dream. We are given a sanitised, fit-for-children's-consumption, comic book experience of the most traumatic event in modern European history. At this point, it does not really matter whether the reader consciously acknowledges the references: the page taps into a culture-wide trauma that has permeated post-war politics. In a hundred years time this impact may well be lessened, but at this moment in time the relationship between the comic and its historical base remains strong enough to maintain its ethical absolutism. Through the referencing of the visual appearance of a Nazi death camp, and more obliquely the mass murder that took place there, the comic engages in reflecting on history that allows no doubt that the references to contemporary political conflicts have their extremes realised in Holocaust.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ In some ways this could be seen as an inversion of Walter Benjamin's image of the Angel Novus in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' found in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt trans. Harry Zorn (London, Sydney: Random House, 1999:1970) pp. 245-255. Whereas in Benjamin's conception the historian sees history as: 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet' (p. 249), this comic takes the fragments of the present and exposes them to a moment (a site of wreckage) from the past. This is an approach that would meet Benjamin's approval, just as 'History is ... filled by the presence of the now' (pp. 252-253), so is the present 'the constellation which [our] own era has formed with a definite earlier one.' In this way, we only make sense of the potentialities in the present through reference to the past.

Halo Jones: Politics of the Marginalised

If *RoboHunter* is a paradigmatic strip from *2000AD* then *The Ballad of Halo Jones* is perhaps the height of the title's sophistication in the early 1980s. Written by Alan Moore and drawn by Ian Gibson, it is worth pausing for a moment to expand on the background of the writer and his significance in this thesis. It is very difficult in an approach such as this, which is trying to identify broad shifts in a medium's output and which places its emphasis on the interaction of text and reader, to do justice to the importance of Alan Moore's contributions to the comics of the time.

However, Moore, like other comics writers, works exclusively in collaboration with artists. Everything that he has produced owes as much to the realisation of his scripts as it does to the scripts themselves. Even in this thesis, we see three very distinct comics both written by Moore, whose radically different affects owe much to the different styles of Ian Gibson on *Halo Jones*, David Lloyd on *V for Vendetta* and Steve Bissette and John Totleben on *Swamp Thing*.

Although Moore was one of a number of fine British comics writers and artists to shape the new UK market—for example, Pat Mills, John Wagner and Alan Grant as writers; Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons, Kevin O'Neill as artists; John Saunders as head of the Children's Division at IPC; Dez Skinn the editor of *Warrior*—he was the first writer from *2000AD* to be successful in the USA, and his approach to both politics and the potential of the comics form represent a sophisticated use of the model developed at that magazine. The focus on comics written by Moore is thus in part incidental. They were chosen as they show an exploration of how the new possibilities for comics opened up in

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this period. The three texts demonstrate not only a range of different ways of responding to the cultural, social and political changes at the time, but they also demonstrate specifically how the period brought about a change in the portrayal of women in comics. This emphasis on thinking about women not just as complex characters (rather than as mere “eye-candy”), but as potential readers too is characteristic of Moore’s writing, but it is also the result of a skilled realisation of his female characters by the artists that he worked with. Moreover the expansion of the target audience for comics to include women was a fundamental part of *2000AD*’s growth and development as the 1980s progressed.

2000AD’s ability to host a comic such as *Halo Jones* clearly demonstrates the four primary reasons for the title’s success discussed in the introduction. It is a rich, complex text that was divided into three separate books (each marking a continuous run in the magazine) between the years 1984 and 1986. As a single storyline it exceeds the normal scope of plots in the magazine and has been published since as a standalone graphic novel (as opposed to ‘Play It Again Sam’ which featured as one story in a collected edition of strips).

The comic charts the adventures of an 18 year old girl from the Hoop, a ‘poverty reduction’ district of New York - a giant ghetto moored off Manhattan in the Atlantic Ocean. The three books narrate distinct areas of her life: the first focuses on life in the Hoop, the second her first year as a waitress aboard a luxury space cruise ship; and the third as an infantrywoman in a brutal imperialist conflict. The narrative is firmly centred on the heroine Halo Jones and some of the episodes take the form of diary entries or letters to home. It is set in a science fiction universe that functions effectively as a credible backdrop and contextual support for the central narrative. Lance Parkin agrees describing one of the

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key achievements of *Halo Jones* as: ‘a piece of Science Fiction world building which mixes the surreal with the mundane’.¹⁹⁰ Various details add to the effect: from the political struggle between the dolphins and the humans; to the concept that this fiftieth century setting is a turbulent time in history being studied from the even more distant future through the lens of its protagonist; to the strength of Gibson's visualisations of a crumbling society that despite its technology is collapsing in upon itself; all help to create a convincing setting for Halo to explore.

It is the consistency of this vision that enables Moore's writing to engage in a steady stream of commentary upon the politics of his time. Not all of this is directly analogous with the changes in Britain and the US during the revolution of the New Right, historical criticism merges with contemporary concerns. It is also central to the dual address mode that is maintained throughout the comic. While the narrative would make sense to a younger reader through its internal consistency, the extra-textual references are directly aimed at an older readership. The conflict in the Tarantula Nebula, for instance, is an interpretation of the Vietnam War, and the structure of this section of the tale has much in common with Joe Haldeman's SF Vietnam commentary classic, *The Forever War* (1974); while an older reader may recognise this, it would not be necessary for a younger reader to make the connections to follow the story.¹⁹¹

There is a second kind of dual address at work here too however. Jones has alternately been described as 'possibly the first feminist hero in comics' and as an 'everywoman', both of which fail to accurately capture what Jones meant for a comic like

¹⁹⁰ Lance Parkin *Pocket Essential Comics: Alan Moore* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001) p. 31

¹⁹¹ Joe Haldeman *The Forever War* (London: Gollanz, 1999: 1974)

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2000AD.¹⁹² The audience was still predominantly male and while Jones is a believable female character, to position her as a feminist or a neutral cypher for women in general is not really the point. She sits on a line between being an attractive, although not overly sexual, female action heroine, to appeal to men, and yet has complex and believable relationships with the women around her. In this way she functions to create a second level of dual address, that between men and women. This may seem like a fairly simplistic argument about gender but it is a function of the publishing expectations of the editors. The comic is carefully balanced in its gendered address, so much so and so well achieved that such a thing may not be immediately obvious to a readership meeting it for the first time in a collected edition. Halo was one of *2000AD*'s first female protagonists and as such was carefully managed as a project to engage more women with the comic (there were by this point already a significant minority of female readers) but without alienating its male core market.¹⁹³ Evidence for this can be found in an interview with Ian Gibson where he suggests that the editors were concerned that the lack of violence in the second book on the cruise ship would turn off the 15 year old boys and thus more was injected in the form of an attempted hijacking.¹⁹⁴

The question of gender is symptomatic of the third way in which *The Ballad of Halo Jones* exemplifies the success of the *2000AD* formula. This is the fragmentary

¹⁹² Unattributed article from the *Observer* newspaper quoted at 'Halo Jones' *Wikipedia Website* available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ballad_of_Halo_Jones date accessed 27/01/2009

¹⁹³ Two previous female characters worth mentioning are Judge Anderson in 'Judge Dredd' drawn by Brian Bolland as 'a sexy looking girl' and Roxy from another Moore strip called 'Skizz'. Both these characters were significant, but Anderson was closer to the American tradition of women in superhero comics (see chapter 6) in that she was initially conceived as a character who would be sexually attractive to male readers. Roxy sets the tone in some ways for Halo Jones, but the latter represented a deliberate effort on the part of the magazine to consolidate its female readers. See Bishop op cit p. 70, pp. 94-95, pp. 101-103.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid p. 106

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approach to politics, specifically the alignment between different contemporary issues without recourse to a unified ideology: that is the emergence of “single issue” politics. I will deal primarily with two of the issues raised in the comic: poverty and sexuality. Both are direct responses to the politics of the era and both, while operating independently, are linked through the portrayal of women.

Poverty is one of the main focuses of the first book and returns as a key theme in third. In the second it is conspicuous through its absence as Halo lives among the mega-rich. In the first book based almost entirely in the Hoop (see figure 14) we see a society made up predominantly of women and extra-terrestrial minorities, riots are an everyday occurrence that can be forecast with the same dubious reliability as the weather ('If the riot forecast says 'fine' dress for Armageddon' as Rodice, Halo's best friend, says to her on a routine yet perilous shopping expedition (p. 24)). In uniting the unemployed, women and ethnic minorities Moore was identifying the main groups that were hardest hit by Thatcher's rise to power. These groups were often denied a voice through the Thatcherite construction of social protest as mere disorder: when race riots exploded across the UK in the early 1980s, Thatcher declared that the 'problem had nothing to do with either race or unemployment, but was a problem of public order.'¹⁹⁵

With the New Right's emphasis on women's domesticity and its narrow definitions of British culture, single women and minorities soon found themselves at risk of becoming part of a permanent underclass. The Hoop perfectly reflects the teleology of this situation, encapsulating how rather than dealing with the problem the Conservative government chose to suppress it, changing the role of the police from crime detection and prevention, to

¹⁹⁵ Andrew Gamble *The Free Economy and The Strong State* (London: Macmillan, 1994 2nd ed.) p. 117

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an institution to preserve social order. The Hoop is a physical form of social control and the shopping trip that dominates book one demonstrates just how effective it is. *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, can be understood as a way of dealing with class issues without talking explicitly about class, instead focusing on associated groups and the state mechanisms for suppression of discontent.

In figures 15 and 16 (pp. 21-22) we see just how difficult the futuristic slum is to navigate, how it controls movement and limits the possibilities of its inhabitants. What should be a routine day-to-day activity becomes a perilous journey through a claustrophobic urban jungle. There is a frenetic energy to the movement through the pages as we are given a rapid tour through the indoor world of this future ghetto. At the mercy of a dangerous public transport system and even more dangerous improvised short-cuts, Halo and Rodice's momentum through the city is built into the page structure. Mirrored through the page, a vertical panel demonstrates movement up and down. To the side of this panel (the left on p. 21, the right on p. 22) 3 panels on either page depict the more active parts of the journey and at the bottom of each page we have a long horizontal panel that contains moments of less frenetic movement: the 'exit gardens' that allow the poor to kill themselves in which we see a young man quietly contemplating suicide while Halo and Rodice race past, and the grate in which Rodice gets her heel stuck thus making them miss a vital connection and the whole journey even more traumatic.

We are brought into the experience of the journey through the breakdown, the movement of the characters of Halo and Rodice, and the shifts from them to the various perils and obstacles of the expedition from panel to panel. The desperate running on page 21 is contrasted with the more stealthy passage through the territory of 'Dreck-Netters',

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'Ferroud-Fangs' and 'Jackyard' workers on page 22. Nevertheless, despite all these perils, the collapse of Rodice's master plan falls not to the serious and fantastical dangers of the future ghetto, but to the very mundane and familiar accident of the fashion obsessed Rodice's shoe getting caught in a grate.

This moment of humour disrupts the tension built up throughout the scene and allows us to connect the alienation created by the strange names and appearances of the Hoop's different sub-cultures with a lived reality where boots get stuck in drains. This pause further reveals the hoop not as some alien landscape, but on reflection, as a potentially familiar one of the 1980s. From the similarity of lining up for the 'mamapoints' with standing in queues at the dole office; to the 'exit gardens' representing the depression associated with unemployment; to the desperation of the 'Dreck-Netters' in their search for income; to the fear of the police in Halo and Rodice's sneaky passage through the 'Jackyards': the journey could be through a run-down area in 1980s Britain. Moreover, along with other groups in the Hoop, like the different drummers, we see a diversification of working class identity that suggests that in such a society the discourse of class as a homogenising descriptor for the political is near to collapse. Like we saw in *RoboHunter*, the comic is acutely aware of the possible consequences of the social, political and economic changes occurring in the early 1980s, yet while *RoboHunter* presents class as a problematic but authentic social grouping, *Halo Jones* shows it fragmenting. The text uses the science fiction setting to magnify the issues which were readily apparent in the day-to-day life of its readers and attempt to put in context the real dangers that the Thatcherite system of government presented.

Yet, while the comic is clearly attacking the potential outcome of such a system, it

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is ambivalent about the way to deal with it. Jones escapes from the Hoop but only through the internal logic of a Thatcherite morality: braving wealthy vigilante groups who kill the rights-less “hoopsiders” for sport, she leaves her confines legitimately and goes begging for work. That she then finds traditional “women's work” as a waitress and “raises herself” out of unemployment without aid from the state makes the message extremely difficult to see as a form of political resistance. There is a resignation to the injustices of the society despite a consciousness of its failings. Jones is not a revolutionary, she is an ordinary woman making the most of a bad situation, playing by the rules and refusing to be a victim. This is partly why I object to the description of her as a feminist as she operates entirely within the bounds of a repressive social milieu and makes no attempt to change the parameters of her life and those of other women. Moreover if she is an 'everywoman', then it would be entirely possible for *everywoman* to emulate her success. She is set up to be a neutral character for readers in the manner described in chapter 3, but this does not make her life unexceptional. To equate what she did (as she reportedly says herself: 'Anybody could have done it' p. 61) as unexceptional and within the grasp of all the suffering women of the Hoop, is, in itself, part of the very ideology of the type of individualistic conservatism Thatcher espoused. To the end of book 2, Halo Jones seems to vindicate the idea that people are responsible for their own poverty.¹⁹⁶

The absence of a radical discourse in *The Ballad of Halo Jones* is critical in understanding how the politics of early 1980s British comics work. There was a deep and abiding cynicism emerging towards politics, one that focused on identifying problems

¹⁹⁶ The strength of the suggestion that ‘anyone could have done it’ is further reduced when we discover that the ostensibly tougher Rodice is so weighed by her social position that she has started to believe that the Hoop is there for her safety saying ‘I’m more comfortable on the Hoop’ p. 111.

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rather than offering solutions. It was a politics of the underdog and its aim was to highlight struggles and injustice rather than coherently propose an alternate political ideology. If we accept that Halo's escape is a personal victory, the world she escapes to offers little in the way of happiness and fulfilment. She seems to progress from one kind of misery to another, only punctuated by moments of, if not happiness, then at least companionship.

As we can see in book 2, even if life aboard the Clara Pandey is as glittering, opulent and decadent as the Hoop was hard, tough and poor; the inequalities of the social structures permeate the sealed bubble of an intergalactic cruise liner. Despite the fact that even the solid waste disposal trailer is beautiful (see p. 67), a different set of problems are caused, again like the Hoop's poverty, by the invisible human government's obsession with the economic over the social. This time however, instead of the disparities becoming apparent within Jones' society, conflict initially emerges from the outside in a backlash against the colonial ambitions of Earth.

The hostage taking at the start of book 2 by the Tarantulan Emancipation Army was initially inserted at the request of the editors who were worried that the girls' magazine sensibilities of adventure aboard a luxury cruise would alienate the male readers. Yet Moore and Gibson use it to set up a number of different themes that will remain important throughout much of the rest of the book. The Tarantulans kidnappers, colonists on previously independent, mineral rich worlds that are desperately short of water, only make the demand that the truth of the conflict be broadcast and that negotiations to trade water supplies recommence.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ The main sticking point over water is adapted from Frank Herbert's *Dune* and its significance for the dolphins who act as interstellar navigators mirrors that of spice for *Dune*'s navigators' guild. See Frank

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They (and later conversation amongst ship's crew at a cocktail party on p. 93) suggest that government is in the pay of big business in the form of Lux Roth Chop the child billionaire and owner of the Clara Pandy, and that the media is falsely reporting a war that has no ethical justification, being merely a grab for resources. The emerging war in the Tarantula Nebula seemingly takes form aboard the ship as a terrifying, but easily resolved hijacking so that it then becomes nothing more than a topic of polite conversation at social soirees. Yet despite the ease with which the denizens of the Clara Pandy can shrug off the incident, it is rendered doubly hypocritical through the extent to which this bastion of glamour and wealth is implicated in the up-coming atrocities through the episode involving the Rat-King.

Taking the presidential suite aboard the ship is a hybrid brain of 5 rats connected through their tails. When one of them gets sick, Halo finds herself with the task of capturing another rat aboard ship to replace the sick symbiote (p. 87). The ramifications of this weird, but simple task will carry themselves throughout the rest of the comic. The Rat-King is in fact a horrific kind of biological warfare, turning rodents on any given planet into a hive-mind weapon that wreaks devastation through the spread of disease and the vicious attacks of millions of rats. Halo, of course, is completely naive as to the real purpose of the rats and, under pain of death should she reveal their existence to anyone, saves the creature.

By the end of book 3, Halo finds herself in a relationship with the brutal general of the Earth forces, the aptly named Luiz Cannibal. At a war crimes tribunal he denies the existence of and use of the Rat-King. Halo, watching, makes the connection: 'A Rat King... several rats knotted into one intelligence. I've seen a rat king. There was one aboard the

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Clara Pandy, being taken to Tarantula. I saved its life. The rats were dropped upon the warzone. They ate the whole world and gnawed the bones of its children. My fault. All my fault. I saved its life. Oh, Luiz... Luiz you lied.’ (p. 191)

Halo, in book 2 a civilian and, aside from her kidnapping, completely ignorant about the war, becomes complicit in its worst atrocity. She has no knowledge of what she is doing, but twice during her time aboard the cruise ship she has become involved in key events of the conflict. While on one level this implies the guilt that members of a society have through inadvertent support of their governments; it is also enmeshed in the most important theme of the book: that of gender, more specifically the way in which women are undermined in heterosexual relationships. Relationships between men and women are consistently portrayed in a negative light culminating in the delicate murder of Luiz Cannibal by Halo when she discovers her complicity in his rat-war atrocity.¹⁹⁸

All of this is prefigured in book 2. Immediately after the rat king incident, Halo states: ‘I have to trust a bunch of rats [with her life]’. Her best friend and roommate Toy Molto misunderstands the reference and replies: ‘You’ve been a woman for eighteen years and you only just realised that?’ (p. 87). Given the significant position of Cannibal and the way in which his and Halo’s relationship is entwined in the war and the rise of the cetaceans to power: politics, gender and sexuality are established as confused categories.

This is not the first time Halo kills one of her suitors. She inadvertently discovers that her security robo-dog Toby murdered his former owner and Halo’s flatmate Brinna when he discovered that she had left him to Halo in her will. Toby discovers that his deed

¹⁹⁸ She does so by loosening a pressure valve on Cannibal’s ‘g-suit’ as he walks outside into the hostile gravity of the planet Moab see p. 192

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has been uncovered and decides that the only way to save himself is to kill Halo. Toby is a robot that has been programmed to be “male” and is driven to his psychosis by the behaviour his computer circuits associate with masculinity. There is not even the possibility of a relationship with Halo, and this is implied when he suggests: ‘We can ... fit me with a new humanoid body. I’d be just like a regular boyfriend.’ (p. 94) Of course he could not be a regular boyfriend only ‘like’ one. Much as he is mechanical simulation of a guard dog, so would he be a simulation of a lover. The strange thing is his determination and ruthlessness in performing his given gender. Thus gender and sexual orientation are increasingly distinct from biological sex. They can be applied to asexual, non-biological objects like Toby. Moreover that the traditionally privileged position - the male heterosexual - is figured as psychotic (even in an artificial simulation of it) undermines conventional assumptions of gender and sexuality.

This is part of a wider exploration of gender and sexuality that gains momentum in book 2 through the character of Glyph. Instead of an artificial gender like Toby, Glyph has lost his/her gender and biological sex through a consumerist approach to transsexuality. Glyph has gone through so many sex changes that his/her biological sex has eroded along with his/her gender. He/she explains to Halo and Toy:

I remember I started off as a girl that much I’m certain of... or maybe I started out as a boy. Never mind – it doesn’t really matter. The thing is I wasn’t really happy as a girl... uh... or maybe I wasn’t happy as a boy... So I had a total body remould that turned me into a boy... or possibly a girl. That would have been fine, except that 6 months after the treatment I started regretting my decision. So I had another remould to turn me back to whatever I started out as. Over the next five years, I changed my mind about whether I wanted to be a boy or a girl forty-seven times. I suppose all those remoulds finally did something to my mind and my body... Eventually, I wasn’t a boy or a girl. I wasn’t anything. I couldn’t even remember what I’d been originally. The doctors were equally confused. Also my personality had been completely erased. That’s why I’m so boring. (pp. 74-75)

Glyph finds himself/herself without sex or gender and thus without personality. In fact, this means that he/she ‘slip[s] beneath the threshold of human awareness’ (p. 75). In a society where even robots aggressively take on gender roles, the being without one is invisible. Despite Toby demonstrating that gender can be assumed and Glyph proving that even biological sex can be changed, both show how central sex and sexuality are in the understanding of identity: any social interaction assumes a gender on the part of those interacting as a pre-requisite otherwise it becomes impossible.

Yet this does not mean that these roles are fixed. Toby’s obsessive behaviour demonstrates the danger of gender being entirely static – he is an example of what happens when it is hard-wired. Glyph’s significance is more complex. Figure 17 (p. 77) elegantly uses the break between the two panels to demonstrate just how cut off he/she is. The sexless Glyph is separated by panel borders from Halo and Toy as they watch their salacious soaps on the holo-vid. As there is no way to fit into a network of sexual attractions and reactions, she/he holds no interest for other sexual beings. A “Glyph” is a symbolic image leading us to ask, what is she/he a symbol of when his/her lack of sex or gender makes him/her invisible? What is the meaning of a glyph that no-one can see? The answer turns upon the significance of *Halo Jones* for *2000AD* and its challenge to the conventional demographic treatment of its readership. Glyph represents an exploration of the readership’s role within the text: the uncertainty about who was reading the comic and how they would figure their place within the text.

On the one hand Glyph stands in for the male readership being projected into the story by the female Halo Jones, on the other he/she stands for the female readership of the

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comic effaced by their assumed absence in the majority of other stories in the magazine. In *Halo Jones* those distinctions become blurred, gender is central to the comic by the simple fact that its protagonist is a woman and women, in our culture, are gendered in a way men are not. By bringing gender to the foreground it erodes conventional distinctions and questions its validity as a static concept. Glyph, largely invisible and unnoticed, is the uncelebrated hero of book 2. S/he saves Halo's life not once but twice: by helping capture the rat for the rat-king and also by making the critical intervention to stop Toby from murdering his mistress, losing his/her life in the process. S/he does this simply in the hope of being noticed. Glyph challenges directly the issue of having a female lead in a boys' comic: the important question seems to be not what gender are you? But why do we put so much importance on gender at all? Glyph, through his/her sexual confusion and invisibility, thematically sets up the key moment in *Halo Jones* and the central and deeply suppressed point of hope in the story: the invisibility of Toy Molto's sexuality.

Before we get into this in detail, it is worth explaining where it fits into the radically different and double length Book 3. This book pushes the politics further – both in terms of geographic difference and its commentary on early 1980s Britain. In the brief sweep of Halo's life, we learn about economic shutdown on Pwuc (p. 114-5) that would be mirrored in the mining towns of northern England and the valleys of Wales later in the 1980s. The environmental issue of deforestation on the forest world of Vescue (p. 116) and the notion of scarcity of natural resources, a theme repeated in the Tarantulan conflict, during her career as an ice smuggler. Halo may have been presented as a success in book 2, but by the main events of book 3 she has moved from one area of crisis to another. Without financial

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security and a middle class education she finds that ‘she’d escaped the Hoop to find a bigger prison waited outside’ (p. 118). In the end this economic prison leads to a simple choice: alcoholism or the army.

Halo is talked into joining the infantry by her best friend from the Clara Pandy, Toy Molto, a tall body builder with a cybernetic implant in her ear to keep up with the radio soaps and a dating record seemingly as disastrous as Halo’s. They go through basic training reminiscent of many a war film before ending up on a planet scorched by aerial assault leaving its lush forests petrified and populated by an impoverished guerrilla resistance. This is an unreconstructed Vietnam, the only significant differences being the exclusively female soldiers.

The significant moment in this section takes place when Halo's platoon has been massacred in a night-time attack on her patrol. Halo and Toy are the only two survivors, but Toy has a leg injury that is infected and will shortly cause her death (see Figure 18). As she realises that she's going to die Toy decides to confess to Halo that her true feelings go beyond friendship:

Toy: I think I’m sometimes not a very honest person. I mean, I.... I show off a lot and act tough...

Halo: Toy, I’ve never thought of you...

Toy: Shut up you know what I’m saying. I’m big and loud, and I never let anybody know what I’m feeling. Sometimes it’s so difficult... I... I really like you Halo.

Halo: Well, sure. I like you too, Toy. You’re my best friend.

Toy: Sure. Best friends. That’s what I meant. (p. 145)

Gibson’s art mirrors the understated tone of Moore’s script. The left of the page is dominated by a stumbling Toy, the first time we have seen any limits to her physicality. She is tenderly supported by Halo who then goes about making a stretcher to drag the

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injured Toy back to base. While she does this, Toy's face moves to the foreground in a series of small panels consistently moving through subtle expressions of earnestness and desperation before passing away on the next page.

The poignancy of this moment is amplified not just by Halo's failure to understand the significance of what Toy has said, but also by the destructiveness of the other two (heterosexual) "romantic" subplots in the book. Much as Glyph vanishes without a gendered identity, Toy's feelings for Halo are invisible throughout much of the book. It is only when she faces the ultimate erasure of death that her real feelings can be shared.

Toy's confession and Halo's apparent naivety is touching because it is the only moment in the book where a genuinely equal relationship appears possible, even if Halo doesn't seem aware of it, the reader is. This is not a suggestion that Halo is interested in women sexually: what I am saying is that this highly repressed possibility for a lesbian relationship is far more positive than all of the heterosexual encounters she has in the book combined. This is what gives the moment its tragic power.

In writing this scene, Moore is returning to the big political theme that is consistent in his work. From Evey's experience in the mock concentration camp in *V for Vendetta*, to *AARGH* and *The Mirror of Love* right up to *Lost Girls*, Moore has been a consistent proponent of gay rights and has written about gay and lesbian relationship throughout his career.¹⁹⁹ The very short exchange here is the way in which he approached it in *Halo Jones*. Although the infamous Section 28 anti-homosexuality law would not be passed for two years after the publication of the comic, the campaign against liberal attitudes to

¹⁹⁹ Alan Moore (ed.) *AARGH* (Northampton: Mad Love 1988); Alan Moore (w), Melinda Gebbie (a) *Lost Girls* (Atlanta, Portland: Top Shelf, 2006)

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homosexuality, which was part of the conservative social backlash against the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s, had reached its peak in the early 1980s as social conservatives had found homosexual rights a convenient issue to arouse the passions of the masses against Labour councils, and particularly the GLC. Clause (and later Section) 28 was the result of a campaign to restore the status of the nuclear family with the woman in the home. It specifically prohibited local authorities (and was intended to include schools²⁰⁰) from ‘intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material’ with the same aim and described same sex relationships as ‘pretended families’.²⁰¹ In this context, and within a comparatively mainstream publication such as *2000AD*, the Toy “confession” moment becomes highly significant: less than 10 years before *Action* had been pulled off the shelves in large part due to its portrayal of Angie. To now be able to publish a story which contained a specific reference to a gay relationship, without sensationalising it, making it exceptional or even drawing specific attention to it shows just how far mainstream comics had come.

Halo Jones is perhaps the best example of how *2000AD* started the shift from a politics based on a homogenous class identity to examining the heterogeneity of poverty and its victims: the disempowered. The social issues of the early 1980s and their possible teleologies were transplanted from a simple class dichotomy that dominated the organisation of British politics prior to Thatcher into sophisticated discourses of race,

²⁰⁰ The government had forgotten that as part of the 1980 Education Act, the shaping of the sex education curriculum was removed from the control of the LEAs and given instead to the Governors of each school. Section 28 proved a powerful influence, but it did not actually cover sex education in the schools. See Office of Public Sector Information ‘1980 Education Act’(online) *UK Statute Law Database* available at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1980/cukpga_19800020_en_1 accessed 28/01/09 and Office of Public Sector Information ‘Local Government Act 1988’(online) *UK Statute Law Database* available at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/ukpga_19880009_en_1 accessed 28/01/09

²⁰¹ Ibid p. 5

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gender and sexuality and a more complex understanding of the processes of oppression beyond a simple economism. Yet, as we see from the comic these sites are intimately connected with the ghettoisation of the poorest and most vulnerable and that the routes out, even by “your bootstraps”, often lead to just as unpleasant places. The very hopelessness depicted in *Halo Jones* critiques neo-liberalism, arguing for a malaise that runs deeper than its heroine’s simple lack of personal finance and into the ethics of a society that is run on greed and privilege.

Yet perhaps more significantly the comic offers clear evidence of the move away from the traditional comics demographic. While in *RoboHunter* an emergent dual address was apparent, in *Halo Jones* the idea of a definitive target audience is toyed with and finally (and narratively) dismantled through the relationships of the characters Glyph and Toy and significantly Halo herself. It is no longer clear that the comic is appropriate and readable to a young audience in ways that the censors of the 1950s would have understood, yet it retained its young readership while playing with identities of gender and sexuality in the context of a science fiction world extrapolated from the politics of Thatcherism. It did so in a way that a reader from a wider demographic could be expected to engage with its themes.

Chapter 5: *V for Vendetta*

Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* offers some similar themes to the two comics from *2000AD*, but is a very different text. It first appeared in *Warrior*: a monthly anthology magazine edited by former Marvel UK editor Dez Skinn to emulate the way *2000AD* captured the zeitgeist of the late 1970s and early 1980s, but for a more adult audience. To do this, it copied some of the manner and tone of French science fiction magazines such as *Metal Hurlant*.²⁰² Although it only lasted until from 1982-1985, *Warrior* can be seen as key to the development of British comics, and a significant factor in UK talent (notably Moore) getting the attention of US publishers. The key strips to do this were *V for Vendetta* and the relaunched *Marvelman* (originally a 1950s British superhero). By the time *Warrior* folded, Moore and Lloyd had finished the first two books of three of *V*, and after a hiatus of three years the comic was bought up by DC Comics in the US and the third book completed.

For its time and the context in which it was published, *V* is an incredibly demanding comic. According to Alan Moore, its biggest innovation was a refusal by Lloyd to use sound effects and thought balloons. These had both been staples of comics since very early on in the medium's development and while both still occur in contemporary comics, thought balloons particularly look increasingly dated (see chapter 6). This is partly thanks to *V*. David Lloyd's art deliberately sets out to provide a more sophisticated use of the

²⁰² Jean Girard, Phillipe Druillet, Jean-Pierre Dionnet and Bernard Farkas (eds.) *Metal Hurlant* (Les Humanoïdes Associés: 1974-1987)

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medium than had previously been found in British comics (except perhaps the near contemporary *Adventures of Luther Arkwright* by Brian Talbot).²⁰³ Alan Moore describes the aim: ‘not only would we do without thought balloons and sound effects but [it would also]... get rid of most of the caption boxes as well and just rely on pictures and dialogue.’²⁰⁴ The degree to which this is an absolute is debatable. While there are no thought balloons per se (little dialogue balloons with a few bubbles instead of the arrow of a speech balloon to indicate the character thinking the words rather than vocalising them) there are extended sequences of internal monologue from several of the characters that appear in caption boxes. This is, however, a very different technique and allows a more literary approach to internality than the thought balloon; it enables the images to diverge from the textboxes in a way that creates a more complex juxtaposition. There is also the occasional caption box from a third person narrator, although aside from in Chapter 1 of *V* these are largely to indicate time and/or date rather than to carry the narrative.

But formal innovation was not the only ambition that Moore and Lloyd demonstrate in *V*. Politics permeates the text. Little more than five years after the censorship of *Action*, this was an openly, explicitly radical text that directly attacked many of the most powerful institutions of the country often through typical terrorist actions like bombings and assassinations. Considering the IRA’s campaign on mainland England at the time, to celebrate these acts (albeit not naively) was deliberately provocative. Yet, like *2000AD*, any direct attack from censors on the comic could be deflected by its science fiction setting. Moreover, as the comic was overtly aimed at adults, any moral outrage claim could be

²⁰³ Bryan Talbot *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* (London: Never Ltd., 1982)

²⁰⁴ Alan Moore ‘Behind the Painted Smile’ in Moore, Lloyd 1988 op cit p. 272

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defended on grounds of fundamental freedom of speech.

Whereas the other two comics from the UK in this thesis were responses to the era of the “if this continues” type, *V* attempted to negate Thatcherism and imagined a world where the political movement was a short lived, insignificant phenomenon. The comic does this while still critiquing its more authoritarian manifestations. Paul Gravett agrees and describes *V* as an outlet for the creator’s ‘anger at Thatcher's regime.’²⁰⁵

The rejection of the terms of Thatcherism leads it to be replaced by a wider conflict between technocratic fascism and iconoclastic anarchism in a near future scenario. Yet it is precisely in responding to its imagined failure that *V* engages the emergence of New Right. The comic writes a future history of the 1980s where the Labour government wins the 1983 election and proceeds with its policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. This sets the scene for the unlikely scenario of Britain surviving a global nuclear war with a fascist dictatorship emerging out of the chaos in the early 1990s. Thematically it pits the Guy Fawkes based character of *V* against the machinations of the state: a bureaucracy run by the omniscient, bureaucratic computer system Fate, backed up by rhetoric proclaiming the ‘destiny of the Nordic race’ and enforced by the fascist party that put them in place (p. 37). Yet it is precisely through these themes that Thatcher’s political rhetoric is engaged. Although the fascist regime operates a complete control economy, the social conservatism of her beliefs and the idea of the strong state are brought keenly into view. Andrew Gamble describes the motivations behind Thatcherism as a movement not stemming from a dogmatic desire to implement neo-liberal economics but by a perceived ‘need to restore the state’s authority

²⁰⁵ Paul Gravett *Comics Britannia 3: Anarchy in The UK* (online) (BBC Website 2007) available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/comicsbritannia/comics-britannia-ep3.shtml> date accessed 09/02/2009

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and reverse the decline of the economy.’²⁰⁶ Thus the ideas of economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman were a tool to advance a political programme, not the foundation of the programme itself. The technocratic appeal of a new science of monetarism to replace the old science of Keynesianism allowed changes to be made with a sense of deferring to the greater specialist wisdom of others. In many ways, this is a direct parallel with the role of the computer Fate in *V* and just as Adam Susan becomes infatuated with his machine, so too did British politics eventually become a slave to neo-liberal economic doctrine.

Like in *RoboHunter* and *Halo Jones* the strength of this criticism lies in its logic within the narrative and the world. Unlike those comics however, the politics is explicit and foregrounded through the central characters. Yet it is more than just the political content that makes *V* such a significant work. Overall *V* is a highly sophisticated, complexly structured comic. It demands a focused, visually literate reader who is given little in the way of ‘anchoring’ text to assist in decoding the pictorial narrative.²⁰⁷ Moore and Lloyd never stutter and they create a tightly paced episodic story arc that relies primarily on the images to drive the action. Despite this imagistic emphasis, characterisation is more complex than in the other comics, this is achieved through the combination of a greater level of detail in drawing of the primary characters and their long expository monologues.²⁰⁸ *V* requires a mature sensibility and a familiarity with the comics medium to be read. It assumes a fully comics literate readership open to ethical ambiguities and interested in

²⁰⁶ Andrew Gamble *The Free Economy and The Strong State* (London: MacMillan, 1988 :2nd ed 1994) p. 5

²⁰⁷ See Roland Barthes ‘The Photographic Message’ in Barthes 1982 op cit pp. 15-31

²⁰⁸ See chapter 3. If we were to position Lloyd’s art on Scott McCloud’s picture plane it would be towards the left hand side. This means that images are closer to singular, specific representations of individual objects rather than the more generalised, “universal” representations of a more cartoony style.

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politics. Much of this is due to the intensity of the artwork.

The specific effects of Lloyd's formal innovations will be dealt with in subsequent analyses below. Nevertheless, it is important to note that two quite distinct versions of the comic have appeared. In the moody chiaroscuro original from *Warrior* magazine, the black and white of the drawings directly contrast with the comics moral ambiguities while still reflecting the oppositional positions of V and the government. The pastel (yet strangely vaudeville) colours of the American rerelease carry a different set of connotations. In maintaining the darkness of the original they suggest the faded glamour of a salacious cabaret, giving the comic an additional level of fictive contrivance that evokes the musical *Cabaret* itself, with all the suggestions of staging, allegory and symbolism that the show used (through the character of the emcee) driving the comic.²⁰⁹ This complements the overly elaborate dramatic plots of the ostensible protagonist: V sees the unfolding narrative in theatrical terms, with himself as playwright and lead actor. In the first chapter he states to the real protagonist Evey: 'There the overture is finished... We must prepare for the first act...' (p. 14) Neither version of the comic should be preferred; unfortunately unless a definitive edition with both colour schemes is produced it will make most sense to refer to the later coloured American edition. One additional consideration to bear in mind is that the original black and white strip was never actually finished and so the only complete edition is the later American one, completed in 1988.

²⁰⁹ Book 2 of *V for Vendetta* is titled 'The Vicious Cabaret' and starts with a scored song of the same name recapping the reader to the events of the comic so far (pp. 89-93). See also *Cabaret* Written by Joe Masteroff, Lyrics by Fred Ebb, Music by John Kander (New York: Broadhurst Theatre, 1966)

V and the Reader

The question of ‘the-reader-in-the-text’ in *V* is complex. Lance Parkin sees *V* as one of many texts in Moore’s oeuvre where an alienating central character is made sympathetic by an “everywoman” co-protagonist.²¹⁰ In *V* this is Evey, and although this is a role she takes most often, other characters share the mantle in various plot twists away from the central characters – no less *V* himself. In terms of biographical background, *V* is largely ephemeral, most of his back-story we can only garner through the recollections of other characters and while his true identity is never known, Evey’s life story is recounted in detail (pp. 26-28). While Evey is a realistic, if slightly bland character thrust into *V*’s sphere of influence by fluke; *V* is a melodramatic ideologue who speaks in riddles and poetry and does everything (including murder) with dramatic flair. Yet the structure of the text relies on the relationship between the two characters. Both engage the reader: Evey providing a normalising pillar to *V*’s eccentricity and singularity of purpose. It is only if we understand them as a pair that we can see how the reader is drawn into the world of the narrative. In this way, *V for Vendetta* advances the technique using not one “reader-in-the-text” but two in a dance between the mundane and the dramatic.

Looking at how this is achieved in more depth, we can see that in terms of McCloud’s scale, running from the specific to the universal (see chapter 3), this comic sits firmly on the side of the specific. Characters tend towards being visually specific and distinctive and there is rarely any difference in the levels of fine detail between important and unimportant characters or foreground and background; stylistically no emphasis is put

²¹⁰ Parkin 2001 op cit p. 27

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on particular characters through the manner in which they are drawn to deliberately suggest the position of the reader. Nevertheless, like McCloud's key example Tintin, V is an idea as much as a character; however, unlike Tintin, V is not implicitly the idea of the reader, but overtly an idea of individual empowerment and iconoclastic anarchism in a struggle against tyranny. While Tintin is expressive, Vs "face" is fixed in an implacable grin, it is Evey who must provide the expressions. That said, on V the mask fills a similar role to that of Tintin's minimalism. It is specific - a Halloween caricature of Guy Fawkes, but the connotation that behind it could be anyone implicates the reader. This is something played with throughout the narrative: Evey continuously wonders if V is her father, the police search desperately for the identity of codename V, his tormentors from Larkhill resettlement camp refer to him only as the man from room five, and finally when V lies dying at the end of the story he says cryptically: 'you must discover whose face lies behind the mask, but you must never see my face.'²¹¹ To know who he is would undo his anonymity and thus his universality, if anyone could be the man behind the mask, the suggestion is that anyone can stand up to fascism, anyone can make a difference. Evey realises this as she puts on the mask and the duo become one – she becomes V and the tension of the reader being engaged through two characters is resolved at the end of the narrative. While this resolution is effective, both in terms of the narrative structure as a whole, and the relationship of the reader to the text, it could only come at the end. It is the tension between V and Evey that has driven the narrative, the condition of Vs anonymity and our anticipation of what he will do next (that we share with Evey) that enable it to function. Once Evey becomes V, the main narrative prop is dissolved.

²¹¹ Moore, Lloyd 1988 op cit p. 245

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Figure 19 (p. 14) contains many of the motifs that structure V and Evey's role within the comic. At this early stage in the story, he has just saved the 16 year old Evey from a group of five fingermen (fascist intelligence officers equivalent to the Gestapo) who she has attempted to prostitute herself to. He kills three of them in the process before whisking Evey safely off to a nearby roof to watch V's ostentatious demolition of the Houses of Parliament.

In the first panel V stares directly at us, looking up from beneath the rhyme:

Remember, remember the fifth of November,
The gunpowder treason and plot.
I know of no reason why the gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.

As with *RoboHunter* and its popular culture references, we are in the realm of the familiar. By playing out what would have happened had the Gunpowder Plot succeeded the comic recontextualises a traditional cultural event and reverses the values that surround it. Rather than Bonfire Night being a celebration of the defeat of subversives and the strength of the state, it becomes the opposite with V and Evey between them governing our response to it as a symbolic act of liberation. With the inclusion of fireworks, the staple way of celebrating the 5th of November (the date in this fictional 1997 when the bombing occurs) the inversion is complete. In this future Britain, the destruction of parliament is to be celebrated. V's commentary and Evey's questions and emotional responses guide us to this conclusion.

In the first and second rows of page 14 both characters look directly at us, V is implacable behind his mask and Evey shows a range of emotions from shock (panel 3), to fear (panel 4) and finally delight (panel 7). The first and third panels, featuring V and Evey

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respectively, are narrowed to emphasise their eyes and the act of looking, making it clear that this is very much a visual spectacle – a performance as much as an act of violence. Each time, they appear to stare directly at the reader and we are placed in the position of either the exploding houses of parliament or the firework display and directly engaged. There is a multiple effect here of at once being guided by their reactions, being the spectacle itself and also being a privileged audience. This is in contrast to the eighth panel split four ways to show the reactions of ordinary people. Unlike with Evey and V, while “ordinary people” stare at the spectacle, they are not turned directly towards the reader. They look beyond, above, or are faceless in silhouette. Moore and Lloyd will often show us the effect of V’s campaign on the general population, but rarely will the reader be looked at directly by a character in the way they are by Evey and V in this example. While other supporting characters such as Rosemary Almond may look directly “through the page”, generally background characters do not, meaning that while we are aware of the wider changes in society following V’s acts we do not feel emotionally invested in the wider social network, remaining on the whole engaged in the high-drama of the central characters. A notable exception to this is pages 188 to 189, where a teenage girl realises that the surveillance cameras are off and gleefully spray paints “Bollocks” on the road, before adding a V in a circle (V’s symbol) on the wall. She looks cheekily up at the off panel cctv camera which is also the viewpoint of the reader.

Returning to page 14, the layout itself supports a reading that emphasises our engagement with Evey and V. The page is structured as an inverted, irregular pyramid (a “V” no less): four panels in the first strip, three in the second and finally two in the third.

The central image in the middle of a V exploding in fireworks mirrors this structure and

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also points to a relationship of consequence between the panels. The two upward “prongs” of the firework V each point to the character V admiring his handiwork. The right hand side of the letter further draws attention to V’s spoken claim ‘I did that’. Further Evey’s expression in the third panel sits in the middle of the two prongs again emphasising her importance. Finally the bottom point of the firework V points to the reaction of the general populace. Thus the central image links the effect of V’s actions to his claim to them outside the normal linear flow of panels.

The final element to complete the page is a series of text boxes, some framed in white, and some embedded white on black in the images that add a further dimension to the event. While technically unnecessary, they pick up on a poetic theme of assonance and alliteration that is carried throughout the book mostly around the letter V, but here on “s”, “r” and “f” sounds:

3rd Person Narrator: The **rum**ble of the explosion has not yet died away as from far below comes the **rattle** of *smaller reports*... and *suddenly* the *sky* is alight with...
Evey: Fireworks! **Real** Fireworks!

....
3rd Person Narrator: and all over London *windows* are thrown open and faces lit with awe and wonder gaze at the omen *scrawled* in fire on the night.
V: The overture *is* finished. Come we *must* prepare for the first act...

...
3rd Person Narrator: It is *precisely* 12:07 am. It begins to **rain**... (p. 14)

The repetition of these three sounds throughout the text keeps the sharper tempo of the first few panels going through the slower larger ones towards the end of the page. We are presented with an additional character: a poetic narrator who remains unseen. Unlike Evey and V there is no immediate relation between him/her and the reader, in fact the narrator’s highly artificial prose creates a distance between us and him/her. What it does do however is emphasise the fictionality of the event. Weaving in and out of the dialogue the narrator

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serves to remind us that this is a story with allegorical implications: the artificiality of the language contrasting with the realism of the visual style.

The positioning of the text also interacts with the layout of the panels. The four text boxes, two bound, two unbound form an inverted V exactly opposite to the central V in the fireworks, but pointing directly at the critical slim 3rd panel in the first strip that contains Evey's eye. Like the page itself, this shape is slightly asymmetrical; although it hints at symmetry. The same could be said of the V shape found in the panel layout and the in image of the firework. While pairings are a theme throughout the book (one often the inverse of the other as we shall see shortly in an analysis of Vs speech to Justice juxtaposed with Adam Susan's soliloquy to Fate) the main effect here is to draw attention to both Evey's eye and the final text box: that at 'precisely 12.07am. It begins to rain.'

The significance of this line is that it reflects a speech bubble on the first page. This is a radio broadcast by the Voice of Fate which announces: 'The weather will be fine until 12.07 am when a shower will commence lasting until 1.30am' (p. 9). This simple and very neat "topping and tailing" of the chapter, is critical to achieving what page 14 sets out to do by way of an exposition to the story as a whole. Fate, the supercomputer at the heart of the fascist government, is infallible and its precision is demonstrated here. Vs comment that the destruction of parliament is merely the overture is reinforced by the overwhelming struggle against a government that can predict not only the weather, but seemingly everything about society too. It does this through a computer that is linked up to a vast network of cameras and microphones in people's houses and that broadcasts unerringly accurate information into their homes. While page 14 may seem like a victory against the state, the rain's simple reminder of what V is up against puts it into stark contrast. Yet it is a struggle for which V

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is prepared and the reminder of the radio weather forecast directly sets up the second chapter in which the actor who is the voice of Fate on the radio will be kidnapped. V may reference the past through his mask and his use of potent historical symbols, but his is a very modern war. It is conducted largely through the media and is not aimed simply at the fascists as physical entities but more generally at undermining further the ideological supremacy of the fascist state.

The page holds together a complex set of relationships between elements. Its effectiveness rests on a unity of diverse aspects: the reader's relationship to Evey and V; the carefully constructed layout at the level of panel, strip and page; the connection between this page and earlier and later passages; and the relationship between this moment in the narrative and what has happened before while anticipating what is to come. It places the reader in several different ways: as Evey and V; as an audience being narrated to; and finally as a person engaged in the cultural traditions of Britain through the references to the gunpowder plot. This last point requires further elaboration.

This critical reference in the narrative works on the assumption that both the fictional bombing of parliament has happened and the historical one has failed. V both visually and through the use of the rhyme makes this explicit. He relies on the cultural baggage of Guy Fawkes for his point to be clear: it is more than simply blowing up parliament, it is the blowing up of parliament on November the 5th wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. We must be able to believe that our cultural understanding of the 5th of November is intact, and recognise that its history remains unchanged, in order to establish the significance of it being reinvoked at this moment in the future. If this were to be set in a contemporary society, its "real world" impact would alter its connotations; it would cease

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to be the symbolic destruction of an abandoned building but the calculated murder of several hundred democratically elected politicians, their staff and whoever else would be there to run the building.

The futuristic version of the gunpowder plot is capable of carrying with it the symbolism of the past with a reflection on the present that only science fiction can offer. By bringing to bear the force of historical revision on a dystopian future, it throws the authoritarianism of the present into light. This historical inversion is central to the text. History interacts at several levels with the narrative and, as in *RoboHunter* and *Halo Jones*, the event provides an ethical touchstone to the thematic content. V's relationship with the historical is dual. On the one hand his adoption of Guy Fawkes puts him in the role of righteous terrorist invoking the persecution of the Catholics in Jacobin England, while on the other we learn he is a concentration camp survivor and victim of enforced medical experimentation. He is at once a victim of history and a subversive historian. Moore and Lloyd challenge us to reassess our relationship with the ideology of history. Instead of accepting the authority of the status quo, they ask us to look at who is suffering and who champions them. We celebrate Guy Fawkes Night without thought, accepting that Britain was somehow saved; V as Fawkes asks us to look again and question authority that claims to be benign but carries out violence in our name.

V for Vendetta demonstrates how constructed our view of history is. In a form of historical pastiche, the 17th century becomes the late 20th and the British government of the 1990s becomes the German one of the 1930s and 1940s. In the fascist political hegemony of V's England, Fawkes becomes an anarchist hero attempting to destroy the seat of tyranny over the people. The palimpsest Moore and Lloyd construct foregrounds the ethics of the

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situation. For Adam Susan, the fascist leader, although Parliament no longer functions, its symbolism is so important that in a fit of rage he declares that his government has lost its ‘oldest symbol of authority’ in a ‘jarring propaganda defeat’ (p. 16). Although almost all parliamentary decision making has been taken over by the super-computer Fate, the *historical* significance of the institution’s building remains.

V’s destruction of Parliament reflects a tension, perhaps even a fusion, throughout the whole of the book, between the historical, the contemporary and the symbolic: between past, present and future. Fawkes and the Holocaust embodied in the character of V is the past, through Evey we relate to the present, and Westminster’s destruction a symbol of the future. As the first instalment in the first issue of *Warrior* the idea is that contemporary readers would be shocked and yet sympathetic to the sentiment of the destruction of Thatcher’s government – responses carefully managed through Evey’s reaction. In essence the world and its politics have become melodrama seen through her eyes as she accompanies the ostentatious V. Her transformations throughout the book are ours. This is allegorical theatre in comics form evoked through the use of the word ‘overture’ at the end of page 14. Like in *RoboHunter*, we are asked to understand the futuristic setting as a vehicle of exaggeration for a commentary on the present. V is using drama to change society – his is an attack of culture, destruction, flair, style and history against the state and its technology, machinery, prejudice, order and barbarism. By destroying the symbols most precious to the new order, he re-invokes their history and brings into the open the disregard shown to history by the fascists who present themselves as its saviours.

A Conversation with Justice

In the fifth chapter, Moore and Lloyd make the conflict between anarchism and fascism explicit. The chapter takes the form of two set-piece monologues, one from Adam Susan leader of the fascists and the other from V. The juxtaposition is in essence the exposition of the two competing ideologies of V and the fascists. In stark contrast to V who spurns the corrupted Justice, Susan worships the computer Fate. His monologue is a justification for his brand of fascism. He states: ‘The only freedom left to my people is the freedom to starve. The freedom to die, the freedom to live in a world of chaos... Do I reserve myself the freedom I deny others? I do not.’ His brand of fascism is based partly in pragmatism following the nuclear war, but it is also grounded in his fetishisation of the computer Fate: ‘She touches me and I am touched by god, by destiny. The whole of existence courses through her. I worship her. I am her slave. No freedom was ever so sweet.’ (p. 38) As Fate is a machine that monitors, predicts and controls society: no wonder then that it becomes an object of obsession for a convinced fascist. Yet Fate itself has no ideological position, it is merely a tool that has been elevated to a symbol of authority. While Susan sees the computer and its functionality as a metaphor for an ideal society (monitoring, control, calculation, utterly indifferent to human experience and ethics), V’s understanding of these things is more complex. This can be seen as he converses with the statue of Justice on the top of the Old Bailey before blowing her up. His speech mirrors that of Susan’s in that it is addressed to a lover, and yet for V this is a comical way of expressing how symbols can be co-opted, not the deeply felt “love” that Susan expresses

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for Fate. Although V is, in typical theatrical style, speaking both parts, the conversation is as follows:

V: I've long admired you... Albeit only from a distance... Please don't think it was only physical I know you're not that kind of girl. No, I loved you as a person, as an ideal. That was a long time ago. I'm afraid there's someone else now...

Justice: What? V! For shame! You have betrayed me for some harlot, some vain and pouting hussy with painted lips and a knowing smile.

V: I, madam? I beg to differ! It was your infidelity that drove me to her arms! ... Ah ha! That surprised you didn't it? You thought I didn't know about your little fling. But I do. I know everything! Frankly I wasn't surprised when I found out. You always have had an eye for a man in uniform.

Justice: Uniform? Why, I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. It was always you V. You were the only one...

V: Liar! Slut! Whore! Deny that you let him have his way with you with his arm-bands and his jack-boots! ... Very well. So you stand revealed at last. You are no longer **my** Justice. You are his justice now. You have bedded another. Well. Two can play at that game!

Justice: Sob! Choke! Wh-who is she V? What is her name?

V: Her name is Anarchy. And she has taught me more as a mistress than you ever did!

pp. 39-41.

There is no-one else in the scene; V speaks alone to Justice in such a way that the dialogue could only be for the benefit of us, the audience. As the viewpoint shifts around, the reader is either directly addressed by V through the point of view of the statue of Justice, or alternately taking Vs position as we see directly the face of the statue. This is a comic book imitating the dramatic monologue of theatre and to do so it uses an imitation of the shot, counter-shot technique common to cinema. Lloyd and Moore are co-opting the established techniques of other media forms and transmediating them into comics. The result is several layers of artifice that suggest the performed nature of symbols. Justice

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cannot speak and so V must give her voice. She is a potent symbol, but that symbol has no content except what it is given. These sections are direct thematic development and yet also serve to foreshadow a dramatic inversion towards the end of the narrative.

For V, before the fascists, Justice was a moral absolute to be cherished and adhered to. Under the fascists the idea has become something quite different. As we see from V's experiences in Larkhill concentration camp, the idea can be co-opted to justify actions quite the opposite of what V understood by the term: the implication is that the symbols of morality are nothing in themselves, they are defined only by their application. As Justice becomes complicit with Susan's regime so "she" becomes a legitimate target for V's attack. When an institution becomes part of a corrupt state, so to do the values of that institution become leveraged by the governing party and thus open to attack. In Althusserian terms V is attacking not just the government directly, but the symbols and institutions that enable it to rule and encourage people to accept and submit to its doctrines – that is, he is attacking the ideological state apparatus.²¹² After negating the symbolic potency of Fate through silencing its voice, the government through the destruction of the Houses of Parliament and now Justice he will go after the church and the media. The theatrical moment in which Justice is symbolically purged with fire vindicates all the other attacks that he engages in. Justice has been destroyed and V recognises no judge's authority.

Ultimately attacking the symbols associated with the institutions that create and maintain power is a strategy that is successful: the government implodes as it no longer has the means to subjugate and control its citizens. Yet there is one last piece of irony that this

²¹² See Louis Althusser 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (eds.) *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage, 1999) pp. 317-323

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section foreshadows. While V knows of Justice's "infidelity", Susan suspects nothing of Fate's. V's campaign is predicated on the fact that in the Shadow Gallery, his home and a museum of forbidden culture, he has a working copy of Fate with access to all the cameras, microphones and data that Susan's version uses. On one level this could be seen to undermine utterly his politics: V uses Fate to stage manage the whole drama, through Fate he knows what people are saying, doing and plotting and thus can be seen as carefully manipulating the outcome. On another level however, other than the murders of the people directly involved in his torture at Larkhill, he attacks only symbols and in his broadcast from a commandeered TV centre he does not give commands, he only challenges people to take responsibility: 'You could have stopped them. All you has to say was "No". You have no spine. You have no pride' (p. 117).

V's strategy is to show people that their government is not all-powerful and encourages them to make a change. He has no interest in power for its own sake, when he renders the surveillance equipment of the state inoperable, he follows it with an announcement that: "'Do what thou wilt" shall be the whole of the law' (p. 187). With the destruction of its symbols and its technology of control V is inverting fascist ideology through the very technological means they had used to enforce it. Fate, like Justice, proves to be a flexible symbol. It too can betray the values it was thought to stand for.

There is one final point here to dwell on before moving on to two final key scenes. V can be considered a morally ambiguous character: he is an unrepentant, even enthusiastic murderer, who kills for a combination of vengeance and political ideology. But the destruction of Justice represents something significant. Under a democracy where government is accountable and the judiciary is independent we have the luxury (at least in

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theory) of a humane and ethical justice system. Under such a system things crimes like murder are absolutely wrong, even when conducted by the state (e.g. capital punishment). In a society where “justice” is used to authorise genocide it no longer has an ethical grounding. In such circumstances, the question is posed by the tale: is killing to punish a wrong doer, even one who has the blood of thousands on their hands still immoral? Do such people still have rights? Vs answer to that question is clearly no: despite his mystery V is not a character that has a sense of moral ambiguity. He is utterly convinced that all his actions are right. Any uncertainty is carried through Evey: after agreeing to help V she becomes complicit in the killing of Bishop Lilliman. After the event Evey confronts him (but looks directly at the reader) saying: ‘V I didn’t know we were going to kill him! Killing’s wrong. Isn’t it?’ to which V replies: ‘Why are you asking me?’ (p64). Evey can’t answer the question and so runs away, in a sense leaving the reader with the dilemma.

Later, having been kicked out of the Shadow Gallery, Evey moves in with Gordon, who is a bootlegger and minor underworld figure (p. 102, pp. 122-123). When Gordon is murdered by Alistair Harper (a Scottish gang leader), Evey, without anyone else to turn to, seeks revenge and tries to shoot the Scot with Gordon’s gun (p. 136-138). Evey is snatched away the instant before she is about to pull the trigger (p. 140). This doesn’t answer her question of whether killing is right or wrong; it does however show that in certain circumstances she is prepared to do it. Fundamentally this question, set up with the destruction of Justice and brought to a head here is the first of two moments of ethical ambiguity, and the comic offers no answers. Instead, through the way in which Evey has been used to moderate our emotional response to the narrative it becomes a moment of true ambiguity. The question is whether justice, and by association standards of behaviour or

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“criminal” acts, is ever absolute or must be decided by the context in which actions occur. Thus as all contexts are experienced subjectively, it cannot be resolved in the text, and is ultimately left up to the reader.

In essence this dilemma is largely in line with V’s ideological position. As an anarchist he cannot tell people what to do, merely show them the alternative. In one instance, this politics of demonstration is taken to the extreme and occupies the second main moment of ambiguity in the text. As Evey is about to shoot Harper, she is seized by a man wearing a policeman’s uniform. She wakes up in a cell through the bars of which she can see the Fascist slogan ‘Strength through Purity, Purity through Faith’ (p. 148). In the following pages she is interrogated, shaved and tortured by those who we can only assume are the agents of the state. It turns out that this is all an elaborate test carried out by V to ‘set [her] free’ (p167). The cell and her tormentors are a stage and puppets. She is offered clemency if she confesses to being V’s accomplice. Finally, however, she refuses to sign a confession as the result of a letter scrawled on a piece of toilet paper that she finds in a small crack in her cell.

It is from a woman called Valerie who is or was in the cell next door. She had been experimented on and writes the letter shortly before her death. Valerie’s letter tells the story of her life and how she has kept going throughout her imprisonment. Two things enable her to survive: love and integrity. She explains how being a lesbian caused problems at school and with her family; she recounts her life as an actress and how she fell in love with a co-star (pp. 154-158). She describes how the fascists came first for her partner and then for her. She forgives her lover betraying her under torture and explains how she has coped:

It is strange that my life should end in such a terrible place, but for three years I was

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happy and had roses and I apologised to nobody. I shall die here. Every inch of me shall perish... except one. An inch. It's small and it's fragile and it's the only thing in the world worth having. You must never lose it, or sell it, or give it away. We must never let them take it from us. I don't know who you are, or whether you're a man or a woman. I may never see you. I will never hug you or cry with you or get drunk with you. But I love you. (pp. 159-160)

This exposition of the power of integrity, of never giving in to torture or blackmail is what enables Evey to cope. It not only gives her the means to hold onto that 'inch' herself, but gives her strength in the knowledge that she is loved. Valerie's is an unconditional love that she is able to give through that sense of integrity. For Evey in her mock cell it gives her the strength to hold out.

The ambiguity in this section of the book again lies not with V who is convinced that he has done the right thing. For V there is no difference in living within a fascist society and being imprisoned in a cell by fascists. He tells her: 'I didn't put you in prison, Evey. I just showed you the bars.' (p. 170) He does not believe that prisons are physical things, rather they are mental and by forcing Evey to choose between death and complicity he thinks he has freed her mind.

You were in a cell Evey. They offered you a choice between the death of your principles and the death of your body. You said you'd rather die. You faced the fear of your own death and you were calm and still. (p. 171)

Nor is Evey uncertain about whether or not the ploy was acceptable. After hearing V's explanation she becomes convinced that she has benefitted from the experience, particularly when she learns that Valerie was a real woman, that the letter is authentic and was the very thing that sustained V and transformed him during his (admittedly more horrific) experiences in Larkhill.

Yet the ambiguity remains. While Evey has been changed by the experience, we the readers cannot have been to the same degree. V is preparing Evey to take over from him, to

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literally become him and from this moment she is fundamentally a proto-V. The experience in the cell has changed her from a character we can connect with to one who is nearly as aloof as V. Despite the fact that throughout Evey's experience in the fake prison we are completely engaged, brought as close as a comic book can to the trauma of the prison and solace the letter offers, the comic does not enable us to actually experience those things and become radically transformed by them. Not in the way that it transforms Evey. Thus while the ambiguity may be resolved for Evey it remains for us, not least through the reminder of our own separation from her from this point on. While post-facto Evey respects the experience and the way it has changed her, it is not one many people would chose willingly. Does enforced suffering make us better people? If you chose it, it might not count. Likewise if someone had the authority (moral or otherwise) to inflict that on someone for their own "good" are there not other ways to achieve the same thing? These questions, ultimately, are unanswerable and the book offers us little in the way of help to resolve them.

Nevertheless, the letter and the prison remain one of the most powerful moments in comics I have ever read. Juxtaposed with the text of the letter, and the images of Evey's torture, are scenes from the life of Valerie, it is uncertain whether they are imagined by Evey or "actual" visions of her life. The weaving of the two strands exposes us to the way in which Evey is transformed, of the power of the letter and its message to change the experience of Evey's suffering. While we may not experience the transformation itself, we do witness the process of it.

During the letter Evey remains our conduit into the text. We never see Valerie's face, it is always hidden from us, but we do see Evey's, increasingly haggard and drawn, as

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she returns to the letter after each bout of torture. When Valerie concludes the letter with the lines: ‘I know every inch of this cell. This cell knows every inch of me. Except one.’ (See figure 20) Evey’s face looks squarely at us. This final panel lacks solidity and the lines of the face merely fade out towards the panel borders instead of having any substance. Again the reader is directly implicated: we are both that one inch that cannot be seen, the oppressors that seek it and a readership challenged to retain our own “inches”.

It is a crucial part of the text, the choice made by Moore and Lloyd that Valerie should be a lesbian rather than black, a left-wing radical or some other group who were persecuted by the fascists is significant. As with *Halo Jones*, Moore has picked out lesbians for a reason. While race riots and other sources of identity based conflict were prevalent in 1980s Britain, it was perhaps only homosexuality that it was permissible to discriminate against publicly on an explicit ideological level. For Moore this was critical, in the introduction to *V* he states: ‘The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept.’ (p. 6) Thus it must be Valerie, a woman who is denied those symbols (marriage, a family) who holds the key to the ethical underpinning of the text.²¹³ She is V’s motivation to overthrow it, just as for Evey Valerie was her inspiration to survive. There is a continual paralleling of action and symbol. It is justice that demanded the removal of Valerie from her partner and her home so V destroys its symbols. It is the government that organised Larkhill camp, so V demolishes its house. It is the media that encouraged society to accept that this was as it should be, so V silences it. In place of these symbols co-opted by fascism V gives them the numeral from the door of his prison cell and a rose.

²¹³ CF Chapter 6 and *Halo Jones*: section 28 forbidding “pretend families”.

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The rose symbolises Valerie's final hope, that people would 'have roses again' after fascism falls. Its significance is double in the text. Whenever V murders, he leaves a single rose with his victim. And then there is also the character Rose Almond who ultimately kills Adam Susan – in some ways a different kind of “rose” gifted to him by V.

Two Assassinations

The murder of Susan happens almost at the end of the book and it is mirrored by V's death at the hands of Detective Finch. The juxtaposition of Susan's death with V's is the counterpart to the section that set out the two characters' ideologies. Both characters are killed by people they have, in some way or other, produced. Susan's state and its brutality drives Rosemary Almond to desperation and a conviction that her only course of action is the assassination of its leader. Finch's attempts to understand what motivates V leads him to try, through taking LSD at Larkhill, to experience V's suffering. While Susan's death is unexpected and absolute, the end of his ideology and the collapse of his state; V's is anticipated and welcomed: not only does he let Finch succeed, he knows that the journey has made Finch a convert, if not to his beliefs, then at least to the collapse of fascism.

Figure 21 and 22 (p. 235 and 236) show the climax of this juxtaposition. The events are wordless, until V already mortally wounded says to Finch: 'There, did you think to kill me? There's no flesh and blood within this cloak to kill. There's only an idea. Ideas are bullet proof.' (figure 22) Until this moment the dramatic tension is held by the stark contrast of the two deaths: Susan's utter surprise in the first panel of figure 21 to V calmly approaching Finch; Rose's certainty of purpose compared to Finch's drug amplified panic; the gore of Susan's exploded head opposed to the finesse with which the dying V walks away. The paralleling of the two events simultaneously, both on the page and in time, gives both an epic, slow motion quality, as if this is the moment that everything has built up to and around which the text can be resolved. And it is all held together by the four characters looking the reader dead in the eye as the events unfold.

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Unlike Susan and V, and now Evey after her experience in the prison, Rose and Finch are relatively ordinary people. Rose was a housewife and Finch a policeman. By looking us in the eyes they seem to ask if we the readers would respond in such a way. Would we be able to kill under such circumstances? Could we be driven to it? It is a question that Rose seems equipped to answer echoing and inverting the thoughts of Molly Bloom on the orgasmic final page of James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Yes, despite the fear, because it's insignificant like everything about me... Yes, though they'll kill me, because if I don't life means nothing... Yes because our lives were wasted on your visions, and they were all we had. Yes, because I can't bear what you've done to us... Yes, because history's driving my legs and nothing, nothing can stop me... Yes, because your kind led us to hell and now you say our only hope is sterner leaders... Yes, because I had a life, a world, a marriage and I valued them but you didn't... Yes, yes... YES. (p234) ²¹⁴

²¹⁴ 'yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.' James Joyce *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 1922) p.732

Summary: British Comics in The Early 1980s

What happened in British comics in the late 1970s and early 1980s was nothing short of a revolution. With only a tiny independent sector, comics creators with ambition had to use the existing methods of production and distribution to reach their target audiences. That meant working within the established genres of children's comics and when that failed, redefining them. To say that this was a deliberate process would be overstepping the mark: it happened organically in the late 1970s through a discourse of a sort with the reactionary bodies of censorship that presided over what was and was not appropriate for children.

As the fierce popularity of *Action* was mirrored in its spiritual successor *2000AD*, methods of placing radical messages into the comics grew more and more sophisticated. *2000AD*'s success was not simply in managing to be just as political as its predecessor, and rapidly as time progressed and its formulas became better developed, more radical in its politics, but in holding on to its audience as they aged, and increasingly attracting an older and more mixed readership directly. *Warrior* emerged to cater for and develop this new found demographic and it was *Warrior* as much as *2000AD* that established the potential of British creators in the eyes of American publisher DC Comics. But what, exactly, were they buying into by employing British talent?

Whether intentional or not, the Americans got was three things. First, the idea that comics need to have thematic content and in general that content should have a relevance to contemporary political issues in a way that challenged them, not just supported the status quo. Second, that the reader should be re-imagined from an eight to thirteen year old boy into a whole range different potential readers, and that these should be offered more

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complex visual techniques. Third that using fantastic environments would enable a more expansive, exploratory look at social and ethical issues whilst evading controversy. This final method was reinforced by using historical references to give gravitas. These three techniques were relatively consistent in British science fiction comics and it was specifically this that the British creators of the period brought to US comics.

Chapter 6: US Comics at the Beginning of the 1980s and the Emergence of the 2000AD Group of British Creators

The Development of the US mainstream

There are many histories of American comic books of varying rigour. Those of most relevance to the argument here are *Comic Book Nation* By Bradford W. Wright, *Faster than a Speeding Bullet* by Stephen Wiener, *Dark Knights* by Greg McCue with Clive Bloom and *Adult Comics* by Roger Sabin (which looks at both the UK and USA).²¹⁵

By the start of the decade in which British creators started work en masse in the USA, new publishing practices had emerged in the US comic market; and by the end of the 1980s whole new conceptual spaces and genres of comics would be in place. In every decade since their inception as a fully fledged mass medium in the 1930s a seismic shift had occurred to change the direction in which comics were heading. At the end of the 1930s the superhero genre had flourished, which, along with children's comics became the most enduring mainstay of the medium. In the 1940s superheroes continued to prosper during the war years only to fade back as peacetime gave crime and romance comics a short lived boom, curtailed by censorship.²¹⁶ The 1950s saw the contraction of the industry in the wake of the second campaign against comics but also experienced the flourishing of the horror comic until it, too, was effectively banned by the formation of the second Comics

²¹⁵ Stephen Wiener *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (New York: NBM, 2003); Roger Sabin *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993); Greg McCue with Clive Bloom *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context* (London: Pluto Press, 1993); Bradford W. Wright *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins UP, 2001).

²¹⁶ See Wright op cit Chapters 2 through 6. pp.30 - 179

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Code.²¹⁷ In the 1960s the superhero was given a new lease of life by Stan Lee at Marvel comics which developed a soap opera approach, centralising the relationships between characters as much as the action, and alongside it an underground comix scene emerged strongly linked to the hippie movement and influenced by the EC horror comics line.²¹⁸ In the 1970s, Lee produced the decisive *Spider-Man* comic that relaxed the Comics Code; during this decade distribution systems changed and the direct market catering directly to collectors and fans started to solidify.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ See Chapter 4

²¹⁸ See Sabin 1996 op cit pp. 92-130; Wiener op cit pp. 9-12

²¹⁹ The story is an interesting one because Marvel were specifically requested by the US government to publish a story with a conservative message about drugs and yet despite this clear message, the comic fell afoul of the Comics Code and could not be published with its approval. What is so striking about this incident is just how irrelevant the drugs reference is to the story in the issue. Peter Parker is about to go and see the love of his life Mary Jane perform in an “off Broadway” musical, on his way he hears sirens and changes into his Spider-Man costume to investigate. He finds a young black man ‘stoned right out of his mind’ about to leap off a building because in his own words: ‘They gotta see – see how I walk on the air –’. As he jumps, Spider-Man swoops in to save him before going to see the play. (See figure 23) In some ways the whole incident seems contrived and weak. This is reinforced by the bizarre discussion following Peter (now out of costume) arriving at the door to the theatre. In it, Randy a black character arrives and gets angry about how everyone thinks drugs are a ‘black man’s bag – but it aint!’ All this (the choice of a black child and the token angry black character) seems to suggest that drugs *are* a black issue (Perhaps suggesting an editorial decision that a white child taking drugs would be unacceptable? I can see no other reason for this). Randy then proceeds to heckle Norman Osborne (the father of Peter’s roommate Harry, and secretly the Green Goblin) for not doing enough to help fight drugs saying ‘You’re rich! You got influence! That makes it your responsibility.’ In some ways this foreshadows an imminent plot line, Harry will spend the next two issues addicted to pills, highlighting the fact that drugs are not a ‘black issue’ (Issues 97 and 98). These next two comics would also not carry the code). Yet the whole episode feels shoe-horned into a story about the return of the Green Goblin as Norman Osborne regresses into the schizophrenic villain.

The editorial decision to highlight the association between black people and drugs, only to deny it and the extreme “drugs kill” message make the whole incident seem very artificial. Contrary to what Wright argues when he states: ‘the story presents a clear antidrug message... in an exciting adventure story without appearing preachy or judgemental’, its very awkwardness and the clumsy way it adds race to the mix makes it feel like a lecture. (Wright op cit p. 239) The most interesting part is an in-joke where two police officers discuss whether to arrest the wanted Spider-Man. In a wink to the problem of the story going out under the Comics Code one says to the other: ‘I’d give up my badge before I bust him for this’. Of course for those three issues, giving up their “badge” in the form of the Comics Code was exactly what Marvel did.

While the success and positive newspaper coverage these issues of *Spider-Man* received forced the Code to change it did not change radically. Wright understands these changes as suggesting that ‘henceforth [the] code permitted almost any situation that was not overly gruesome, offensive or obscene’, Nyberg states the ‘liberalization of the code had less impact on the industry in the 1970s than one might expect.’ (Wright op cit p. 240, Nyberg op cit p. 142) The latter suggests that the trend for “edgy” stories

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By the 1980s, the affect of these changes had filtered through to bring about a time where comics could develop explosively in several different directions. The direct market opened up new publishing opportunities. It was a new distribution network meant that specialist shops could buy set numbers of specific comics with no “sale or return” contract. This new publishing and retail mechanism allowed for smaller runs of comic books which could prove economically feasible in a niche market.²²⁰ Furthermore, independent comics creators could publish original material without recourse to major publishers and distributors editorially committed to the comics code. A host of new comics publishers sprung up, some enduring like Fantagraphics, others less so like Eclipse Comics.²²¹

Some of the new independent creators writing for the new publishers had a background in the underground comics of the 1960s and 1970s or at least strong links (like Harvey Pekar, creator of *American Splendor*).²²² Others benefited artistically from not being tied to the counter culture movement and were free to explore the medium in a myriad of different ways, others (such as the Hernandez Brothers and their punk influenced comic *Love and Rockets*²²³) initially tied themselves to new youth sub-cultures. Many of these independents started to move away from the historically dominant genre works that had remained central to the commercial medium. The most famous example of this process

was short lived, while the former can only really point to two examples at the time that took any opportunity for real social criticism. In fact the main changes to the actual text of the code were four fold: a long preamble was added; references to supernatural creatures were permitted so long as they remained true to their literary roots; restrictions on showing corrupt officials were relaxed so long as they are ‘declared an exceptional case and made to pay the legal price’; and, most significantly, drugs were allowed to be shown on the condition that they were shown to be a ‘vicious habit’. See also Wright op cit pp. 226-253

²²⁰ See Wright op cit pp. 260-262

²²¹ Fantagraphics is still going strong, Eclipse folded in 1994.

²²² Harvey Pekar (w) and various (a) *American Splendor* (various locations: various publishers, 1977-present)

²²³ Gilbert Hernandez, Jamie Hernandez *Love and Rockets* (Seattle: Fantagraphics 1982-1996)

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is *Raw* magazine, which featured the serialisation of the Pulitzer prize winning comic *Maus*.²²⁴ However, what is particularly interesting about *Raw* is that it was conceived as an art magazine, not something exclusively for the direct market.²²⁵

Also among the independents were the first in a new generation (since the comix) of self-published comics. Key among these was *Elf Quest* and *Cerebus*.²²⁶ Both were fantasy, *Elf Quest* was an endearing and earnest take on the sword-and-sorcery sub-genre, *Cerebus* was initially parody of Conan the Barbarian, but fast became political in the manner of many of the new British comics. Canadian Dave Sim creator of *Cerebus* used fantasy as *2000AD* used science fiction, however unlike the British comic it was primarily aimed at adults and its satirical target was as often mainstream comic books as it was current affairs: the second through fourth volumes (collecting the comics published from 1981 through 1988) deal with bureaucracy, politics and religion in general terms, but include key figures like Margaret Thatcher as characters. If there were one text of the period outside the movement of British creators to the USA from *2000AD* to *Swamp Thing* that was as influential in a similar way, *Cerebus* would be it.

The new independent comics “scene” was often virulently hostile to the mainstream comics of Marvel and DC ilk. Emblematic of this trend was its main fanzine, *The Comics Journal*, also published by Fantagraphics and edited by its owner Gary Groth of whom Dez Skinn expressed the opinion: ‘considering his savage verbal attacks [on mainstream

²²⁴ Art Spiegelman *The Complete Maus* (London, New York: Penguin, 2003)

²²⁵ *Raw* Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman (eds.) (New York: Raw Books and Graphics, 1980-1991) See Sabin 1996 op cit pp. 178-182

²²⁶ Dave Sim (with Gerhard 1984-2004) *Cerebus* (Kitchner: Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1977-2004); Richard Pini (w) and Wendy Pini (a) *Elf Quest* (Boston: Warp Graphic 1978-1984) there have subsequently been many publications based on the original run; See Nyberg op cit p. 145 and Wiener op cit pp. 26-27

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comics] it's amazing that [he] has never had his lights punched out'.²²⁷ In his own words, Groth saw alternative comics as an attempt to rescue the medium from commercial 'hacks', while he was willing to give credit to a few exceptional artists, his view of the mainstream medium was damning:

Although there was the occasional brilliant artist, such as Harvey Kurtzman [EC and *MAD*] or Carl Barks [Disney], and many more remarkable craftsmen, the great bulk of comic books were purile junk, shoddily produced and marketed to children.²²⁸

Moreover, Groth believed that much of the credit for the new comics, lay not with the artists but with the publishers, not least himself and his mouthpiece the *Journal*:

By the early 1980s, the *Journal* had defined its journalistic and critical perspective; at the same time, *perhaps not so coincidentally*, artists had begun to emerge (or flourish) who appreciated the values espoused by the magazine. (emphasis mine)²²⁹

However, Groth's comments are inevitably self-aggrandising. The arrival of alternative comics in the 1980s was a confluence of various factors and could not be reduced to one magazine or indeed one publisher.

The emergence of an independent comics scene was not the only major change to the industry. Comics started to become part of huge multi-format franchises. Toys, TV-series, films and increasingly computer games all started to either use comics either as source material or to extend their brands into comics too. This had happened since the beginning of comics, with *Superman* radio programmes and films and the famous Adam West *Batman* TV series, but in the 1980s the trend increased.²³⁰ While previously, the movement from comics to film or *vice versa* had been one of adaptation, by the 1980s the

²²⁷ Skinn op cit p. 244

²²⁸ Gary Groth and Robert Fiore *The New Comics* (New York: Berkley Books, 1988) p. xi

²²⁹ Ibid p. x

²³⁰ Superman had been made into a film several times before 1980s. The earliest Dave Fleischer (dir) *Superman* (Fleischer Studios, 1941)

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relationship was closer to complementary parts of the same narrative franchise. The best example is perhaps *Transformers*: it involved a partnership between Marvel and Hasbro who in 1984 successfully experimented with the simultaneous launch of a toy range, animated series and comic book. *Transformers*-type franchises were rarer amongst independents, but by the end of the decade Eastman and Laird's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* had become a successful global franchise involving film, animation, comic books and toys.²³¹ Again, although this started as a comic, by the early 1990s the *TMNT* were a genuine multi-format phenomenon in which all the different elements were interlinked with the whole operation tightly controlled by its creators. Similarly Dark Horse comics established a niche producing comics to support major SF franchises, notably *Aliens*, *Predator* and *Terminator*.²³² By the end of the decade "cult" comics were similarly marketing "collectibles", as a glance on the shelves of the many comics and science fiction bookshops demonstrates. In many stores, the collectibles appear to crowd out the originating texts (Forbidden Planet, in Covent Garden, London, shelves the collectibles on the ground floor, and books and comics in the basement).

For the two remaining large comics companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, it was a time of increasing competition and increasing sales. This forced both companies to experiment with both content, new formats and, as in the case of *Transformers* for Marvel, new partnerships. In the end, to compete with innovation in other areas of the field, they needed to try something new. DC Comics decided to hire British talent en masse. British creators offered fresh perspectives on content, and they had different approaches to the

²³¹ See Sabin op cit 1996 p. 159

²³² Ibid p. 173

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form, different priorities in attracting and retaining readers and different socio-political viewpoints on the current affairs of the period.

The timing of the “British Invasion” came when independent comics stores were flourishing, genres outside the superhero were starting to emerge and, drawing upon the underground, creators were making more demands of their medium both formally and in its ability to provide a deeper socio-political commentary. One thing British creators’ entry into American comics did was to link the mainstream and independent producers and markets. Groth included an interview with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons in his 1988 book as evidence of a new era in comics, despite the fact had made their names in the USA at DC Comics: a company he purported to despise.²³³

One of the hallmarks of the publishing industry in the 1980s was the growing recognition of a collectors’ market for new work. Better than other print industries perhaps, comics were well placed to exploit their consumerist formats, strong visuals and emerging status as fetish objects for collectors. Furthermore, comics benefitted enormously from the new entrepreneurial economic climate, and the growing possibilities of niche marketing, even as some comics critiqued the period’s politics.

²³³ See Groth 1988 op cit pp. 94-104

Marvel Superheroes: X-Men and Daredevil at the Start of the 1980s

One of the most significant aspects of the intervention of the *2000AD* sensibility in the US market is that it forced a change in formal techniques used in mainstream comics. As distribution methods, external contexts (e.g. censorship, competition from other media) and reader demographics have changed so has the dominant genre of the superhero had to respond. An early example of this would be the introduction of sidekicks in the early 1940s as the perception was that younger children could not relate to adult protagonists. The first was Batman's sidekick Robin, as McCue and Bloom argue: 'Robin became an instant figure for identification with young readers. While children could certainly imagine growing up to be Batman, it was much easier to pretend he was your pal'.²³⁴

By the beginning of the 1960s the Comics Code had institutionalised newsstand comics as a juvenile medium. Sidekicks were common place even forming their own superhero teams such as the *Teen Titans*. The code limited and restricted not just the content of mainstream comics but strictly their ability to imagine their primary readers outside a demographic roughly seven to thirteen years old. The perception was that this was a mass medium competing with television for the spare time of children.²³⁵

To expand the market for their product, Marvel instituted a soap opera approach in their attempt to try to bring back an adolescent audience. They also put a new emphasis on

²³⁴ McCue and Bloom op cit p. 25 There are significant issues with the idea of identification as opposed to engagement. Incorporated into a full response to this would ideas around child psychology, play and projection. This is outside my area of knowledge and expertise, but it would be an interesting study that looks, not into whether these things are good or bad from a public health perspective in the manner of the campaigns against comics, but as how people individually and collectively incorporate fictional characters into their fantasy lives and mental play.

²³⁵ Wright sees the Comics Code as the major obstacle preventing comics from competing with television as a medium. See Wright op cit pp. 181-183

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art as aesthetic over narrative content. Utilising the talents of key artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko for dramatic action sequences they changed the relationship between artist and writer so that the story tended to be a joint exercise by both, rather than a script given by the writer to the artist for drawing. This emphasis on the artwork in the production process shaped comics that did particularly well in the collectors market and managed not only to expand the readership of the Marvel comics to adolescents, but to maintain many readers interest in comics into adulthood as collectors. Fundamentally, by remaining tied to the Comics Code and catering to the perceived opportunities of the direct market by maintaining the emphasis on art, Marvel managed to create a successful, but creatively limited, paradigm for the superhero genre.

To develop these arguments around the structure of the Marvel style comics and their difference to the comics that followed, we will return to close analysis of pages from comics of the period. Before that it is worth noting a number of significant differences between these comics and the British ones considered in previous chapters. In general, US comics did not appear as strips or pages in anthology magazines. Instead they were published in the conventional US format of monthly thirty-two page comic stories, a comic “book”. This longer serialised form allowed for a much slower approach to plot development. While in *Warrior* or *2000AD* each instalment would cover from four to six pages (occasionally more or less) and would often begin with a recapitulation and end in a cliff-hanger; in a thirty two page US comic, a single story would normally fill twenty four of those pages with the rest taken up with advertising and editorial. In the British comics, stories were compressed and characters had to be instantly engaging. This led to strong identifiable characters and denser storylines and the development of kinds of direct visual

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address, for instance by sophisticated use of characters looking through the fourth wall at the reader: a technique that we have looked at previously. In US superhero comics there was less need to have such an immediate effect in the comic itself: the development of characters was more gradual and the emphasis was placed on explosive art and action sequences. As Sabin notes: '[US comics] were generally glossier than British comics, with four-colour production and exciting, attention-grabbing covers.'²³⁶ Covers and cover art were given an increased emphasis not only because they offered a tantalising glimpse into the storyline, but also because they were a focus of collectability.²³⁷

The focus on art led not only to slower more complex plot development per issue, but far more splash pages and in the case of Marvel Comics, as we have seen, a different mode of collaboration between writer and artist.²³⁸ In US comics, character development was communicated through short background flashbacks sometimes taking up a whole page, and while in many British comics the reader would need to have been caught up on the previous action by the end of the first frame, in thirty two page comics, more space was available for revisiting past actions and the artificial "previously in this comic" was less prevalent and more often worked into the dialogue. The luxury of space meant that far more emphasis could be placed on the quality of the artwork than the strength of the narrative.

Again this was partly driven by the collectors market that had sprung up in the 1960s and

²³⁶ Sabin 1993 op cit p. 62

²³⁷ As the 1980s progressed cover art became more significant in British comics too (as they learnt from their American counterparts) for instance from 1987 onwards *2000AD* was moved to a glossy format with lavish often oil painted covers. That said, *Warrior* had always had emphasised covers took an approach to comics covers similar to that in the US. Previously however in general covers were just as often used to promote toy giveaways as they were to show polished illustrative art.

²³⁸ The Marvel style of comics writing would involve an artist being given a short brief of the plot by the writer; the artist would then go away and draw the pages as he/she saw fit to which the writer would then return and add dialogue to fit the images. The traditional method is to give the artist a script with panel breakdowns and dialogue completed before they started drawing.

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1970s, as Sabin argues: ‘Artwork ... became much more appreciated than story content, with specifics like anatomical correctness and attention to detail being a sure sign of collectability.’²³⁹

It was British creators that broke this paradigm of art over narrative. Through the lens of the fan collecting market, the 1980s saw a shift from a near total dominance of artist driven collecting (Marvel writer and editor Stan Lee a notable exception) to a much more mixed market with writers such as Alan Moore and Grant Morrison attracting a new type of audience. Neil Gaiman was able to launch a novel writing career following his *Sandman* series, taking a cult comics audience into the novel market, which also elevated artist Dave McKean to fan celebrity status.²⁴⁰ This shift was enormously significant for the industry’s output and priorities.²⁴¹ Moore and other British creators brought to the slower mode of the US market, a discipline produced through weekly deadlines and tight space allocations. We can see these differences, and the influence of the *2000AD* mode, through close readings of the work of two of Marvel’s biggest name creators of the period, followed by an analysis of Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and John Totleben’s *Swamp Thing*.

At the end of the 1970s two names had emerged at Marvel that seemed to advance the superhero genre in new directions. British born Chris Claremont was one of the key

²³⁹ Sabin 1993 op cit pp. 62-3

²⁴⁰ Hollywood has been slow to acknowledge process of transfer. On the first night of the release of the movie, of Gaiman’s *Stardust* in the UK, movie-goers were asked to indicate on cards their reason’s for attending the movie. Enthusiasm for either the author or the illustrator of the original novel (Charles Vess) was not one of the available options on the turndown card. (source: Farah Mendlesohn). Mathew Vaughn (dir.) *Stardust* (Paramount Pictures, 2007) See also Sabin 1993 op cit p. 267 note 2. Neil Gaiman (w) Various Artists *Sandman* (New York: DC Comics, 1989-1996)

²⁴¹ Sabin notes the extent to which this took hold in that companies would release comics ‘with several different covers, a device to encourage fans to buy numerous issues of the same comic’ 1993 op cit p. 68. Most collectors would already buy two copies, one to read and one to keep pristine in plastic to protect the fragile pages of the comic and retain its value.

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writers for Marvel comics in the 1970s and is credited with developing the ‘social outcast’ theme in the X-Men.²⁴² Despite his background, Claremont was very much part of an American tradition, and he was not part of the distinct group of British creators that made the move over to the US from 2000AD.

Frank Miller’s work on Daredevil from 1979 was initially as an artist but by 1981 he had started writing as well.²⁴³ Chapter 7 will look at his creator owned title *Ronin* with DC Comics as well as his most famous work of the decade, however, was *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, for DC Comics which he both wrote and pencilled.²⁴⁴ Miller has been identified by Richard Reynolds as one of the key creators working in the field at the time, and Reynolds traces a connection through Claremont, to Miller and finally to Moore.²⁴⁵ Looking at Claremont and Miller’s work prior to the “British Invasion” is indicative of the differences between the two countries, and the changes that took place after the introduction of British creators to the American market. That relationship is perhaps not so clear cut, Moore’s work relates to the other two creators as far as it was substantially different, a reaction rather than a progression; and Miller’s *Batman*, as we shall see, seems to be more clearly influenced by the work of Moore than the other way around. A brief analysis of a section of Chris Claremont and John Byrne’s run on the X-men taken from the collected *The Dark Phoenix Saga* and Frank Miller’s *Daredevil* will

²⁴² See Wright op cit p. 264

²⁴³ *Daredevil* started at Marvel in 1964. Frank Miller’s run lasted from 1979 to 1983 although he has returned to the character several times since. His collected in several volumes. The first key period he wrote and drew the comic is from 1981-1983 and is collected in Frank Miller *Daredevil Visionaries: Frank Miller Volumes 2 and 3* (New York: Marvel Comics: 2001)

²⁴⁴ Frank Miller *Ronin* (New York: DC Comics, 1987) originally published in comic book format 1983-4. Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) originally published in comic book format 1986.

²⁴⁵ Richard Reynolds *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) Chapter 4 ‘Three Key Texts’ pp. 84-118

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help to make clear what was at stake.²⁴⁶

Figure 24 shows a page from towards the end of *The Dark Phoenix Saga*. Prior to this, telepathic and telekinetic Jean Grey (Phoenix) has been corrupted by a secret society—The Hell Fire Club—into embracing her evil, impulsive side as the Dark Phoenix. Having broken free from the Hell Fire Club she travels through space and destroys a star killing the billions of inhabitants on an orbiting planet. She returns to earth and visits her family who reject her, at which point the X-men turn up in an attempt to capture her. Beast, the blue skinned mutant in the bottom right panel has put a mind scrambling device on her head to restrict her powers, but as by this time Dark Phoenix is as powerful as a goddess, she still manages to put up a fight.

The page shows a typical action scene from Claremont's run on the comic with artist John Byrne (another British born creator whose involvement with comics is entirely separate to that of the *2000AD* group). All the three characters, Ororo/Storm, Beast and Dark Phoenix have previously been friends and teammates.²⁴⁷ In the scene there are three channels of communication at work: the dialogue and thought balloons each carry one message and the images another. The three relate, but on different levels. Storm and the Phoenix have been close friends and the dialogue here reflects that: Ororo says she loves Jean, and Jean claims she used to love her but in her dark state will kill her regardless. The two throw bolts of kinetic energy and elemental energy at each other as they converse. Likewise, Beast's 'carrot top' comment suggests affection despite the panel showing him seizing her in midair. On the third level the thought balloons provide us with a quite

²⁴⁶ Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a) *X-men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006) originally published in comic book format 1980. Frank Miller 2001 Volume 2 op cit.

²⁴⁷ Reynolds op cit p. 86

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different tone. Both Ororo and Beast express to the reader their inner concerns. Ororo admires Jean's courage and identifies with her: 'She won't yield! No more than any of us would were our positions reversed.' This recognition that the fight will carry on regardless seems to make the dialogue superfluous, as Storm says: 'I don't want to do this Jean! None of us do!' And even as Beast speaks his affectionate witticism he thinks in panic that his plan involving the 'diadem' has failed.

Within the context of the narrative all of this makes sense, the three strands hold together in what Charles Hatfield identifies as a tension between the elements.²⁴⁸ Yet all three strands represent quite different priorities with the text. The images emphasise the aesthetic importance of art discussed earlier, there is nothing intrinsic to the plot communicated in the artwork: motivation and narrative development are communicated in the thought balloons. The fight could be "choreographed" any number of ways, its purpose is to look dramatic not progress the story. At one point though, it does stand in relationship to the dialogue: even in the midst of a deadly battle Jean takes the time to come up with a witty riposte as she returns Storm's hurricane with a telekinetic bolt, thus bringing the content of image and dialogue into a relationship of similarity. This is perhaps of result of the subordinate role the dialogue holds in relation to the art, Claremont has added dialogue that complements the art post-drawing.²⁴⁹

The dialogue in general presents us with a different sort of drama, that of "hip" social banter. The importance is on wit and word play rather than actual content. However while the images carry the excitement of the action, the dialogue reminds the reader that

²⁴⁸ See Hatfield op cit Chapter 2 pp. 32-67. See also chapter 3 of this thesis.

²⁴⁹ It is because of the order in which art and story are conceived that Byrne receives a co-plotter credit throughout the sequence featured in the collected *Dark Phoenix Saga*.

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this is a battle not between any two superheroes, but between friends. The characters must appear witty, but even so, while the fight is spectacular the dialogue is intimate. It is offering the reader an insight into the lives of superheroic teenagers. With no clear reader-in-the-text character, the comic attempts to engage readers through an ensemble social dynamic: the “hipness” of their conversations implying that this is a sort of friendship group that readers could aspire to.

This is carried on through the thought balloons: as there is no one character that readers are directly brought into the narrative through, we must have a continual update on individual team members’ thoughts. This not only interrupts the pace but also, as mentioned earlier, detracts from the role of the art in communicating narrative content. As Reynolds points out ‘comics are a collective effort’, which indeed they are. However he follows this comment by stating ‘nothing demonstrates this principle better than the Byrne/Claremont... *X-Men*’, which I find very difficult to agree with.²⁵⁰ For instance Beast’s thought that: ‘the diadem’s glowing’, is making reference to a visual property of an object in the panel: something that could be clear from the art. The thought balloons are there in part to cover the narrative insufficiencies of the otherwise frenetic artwork and its progression from panel to panel.

In chapter 3 we saw how McCay’s continuous text narrative guaranteed that an earlier generation of readers new to comics would be sure to understand the content of the image sequence. Here a similar thing is occurring, except that the purpose is to free the artist from narrative responsibility rather than a fear of readers’ illiteracy. The privilege of raw art over narrative progression means that the written text is there not for its own sake

²⁵⁰ Reynolds op cit p. 86

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and what it can add to the overall progression of the story and development of character, but to cover the gaps that the art should have communicated.

My position is not a privileging of abstraction or obscurantism: the narrative needs to be clear for a comic to function, but encouraging the reader to make sense of the action through constructing movement in sequences of images is how the medium most effectively engages readers. In this instance, I would argue that reader engagement has been diminished by the replete narrative constructed through the three key elements on the page. Useful analogies to explain why this overfilling of a comics page is poor craftsmanship would be to imagine a radio soap like *The Archers* in which after every time someone spoke a narrator would follow it with “said Reggie” or whoever was speaking.²⁵¹ Or worse, in theatre, each actor reading the stage directions. . There is nothing intrinsically wrong with using thought balloons, or indeed caption boxes; but when addressing a comics literate readership they should not “double-up” the work of the pictures instead of genuinely adding something to a scene.

This is not the only issue I would raise with this page. In the 1970s and early 1980s, while identifying themselves as liberal hip and edgy, Marvel remained governed by a conservative approach to social and political subject matter. As a company it remained committed to a core message in which the status quo nearly always redeemed itself.²⁵² It

²⁵¹ Various Dir. Various Prod. *The Archers* (Radio)(London: BBC 1950-present)

²⁵² A key example is Steve Englehart with John Warner (w), Sal Buscema, Frank Robbins and Herb Trimpe (a) *Captain America and The Falcon: Nomad* (New York: Marvel, 2006) originally published in comic book format 1974-5. This comic sees the quintessentially patriotic Captain America give up his costume and reject America to become the Nomad after the Watergate scandal. However the whole premise becomes a journey for the Captain to re-affirm his patriotism. Moreover *X-Men* artist John Byrne has said that his work is conservative in principle and is always aimed at: ‘a Middle America Bible Belt mentality’.

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attacked prejudice and yet continued to produce it in low level ways. The privilege of art over narrative relates to the pictorial representation of the women, and especially Storm.

While having a powerful, black female character as one of your protagonists seems progressive, Storm's sexualisation (and lack of sexuality) undoes this. As Reynolds suggests: 'she sports the most revealing and fetishistic black costume of any 1970s DC or Marvel character'.²⁵³ As a character, Storm is a maternal figure for whom: '[her] exotic [visual] sexuality is offered in the context of family and domestic life.'²⁵⁴ Thus, while her costume is daringly sexual and her poses tend to emphasise her breasts and crotch (which along with her feet and knees tend to be the only parts of her body covered by her costume), her role is gendered in a far less challenging way. In fact, it would be difficult to see Storm as a sexual being at all the way she is rendered in the narrative arc (again a clear divergence between the pictorial and the verbal in the comic).

There is nothing particularly exemplary about Storm's portrayal: it was and continues to be standard for the genre and, moreover, could be seen reflected outside comics in numerous examples from high art to film to television.²⁵⁵ Despite the 1971 version of the code clearly stating: 'suggestive and salacious illustration is unacceptable', Reynolds identifies this as a core aspect of the superhero genre's portrayal of women: 'Sexuality is simultaneously presented – from the male point of view – in all its tempting erotic trappings – and then controlled, or domesticated, by a simple denial of its power and

See Wright op cit p. 265

²⁵³ Reynolds op cit p. 94

²⁵⁴ Ibid p. 94

²⁵⁵ See John Berger et al. *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972) which details the phenomenon of women being represented as aesthetic objects to be looked at, whereas men are assumed to be doing the looking.

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appeal²⁵⁶

Storm wears her sexual identity rather than acting upon it: despite a costume that would not be out of place in an S and M night club she seems to have almost no libido at all. Around her other characters, who tend to be less erotically drawn (notably the fourteen year old Kitty Pryde), have romantic interests. In this logic, extrovert women's sexuality is fundamentally there to be looked at not acted upon. Thus in comparison to the more rounded sexualities of female characters seen throughout this thesis (and in particular in relation to Halo Jones and Evey in chapters 4 and 5), privileging of art in the way we have seen here is an emphasis on voyeurism rather than engagement.

Marvel also experimented with *X-Men* titles in the new direct market, prestige format titles that worked outside the Comics Code. One example, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* written by Chris Claremont and pencilled by Eric Anderson, would not have received the code seal because its lead villain is a homicidal protestant minister. This story attempted to push the boundaries that are possible in superhero comics by linking organised religion with genocide, but fell back into suggesting that this is a one off scenario.²⁵⁷ Decades of American publishers working within the Code had institutionalised them to a narrow position on social commentary. As Wright argues: 'in an American society facing deepening political divisions, Marvel's superheroes worked to preserve what remained of the vital centre. DC superheroes tended to take the same position.'²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Nyberg op cit p. 173; Reynolds op cit p. 80

²⁵⁷ The minister turns out to be a homicidal socio-path, albeit a charismatic one, who has been deeply traumatised by military service. His psychosis manifests itself as an anti-mutant racist discourse. See Chris Claremont (w), Brent Anderson (a) *God Loves, Man Kills* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007: 1982)

²⁵⁸ Wright op cit p. 235

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Frank Miller's run on *Daredevil* demonstrates similar limitations. For a Comics Code branded, superhero, newsstand title, it pushed the bounds of the genre further than many others, but it was committed to a core sensibility that society is fundamentally just and the status-quo something to be conserved. Miller would go on to challenge this idea, first in his work for DC and later even further in his Martha Washington series for Dark Horse publishing, however in *Daredevil* the innovation came in other ways.²⁵⁹

Miller was the great synthesiser in American comics of the period. He was able to absorb different styles and techniques, narrative conventions and socio-political themes. In figure 25, from the September 1981 issue, we can see aspects of how these different influences become apparent in his comics. There is the characteristic over-deployment of thought balloons of the Marvel comics to provide information that guides our response to the images, but here it is better implemented because the thought balloons do not stop the pictures carrying the content, but clarify their effect.²⁶⁰ To give just one example, as Matt Murdock (aka Daredevil) becomes aware of the presence of ninja assassins in his home, the train of thought is interrupted with a 'What the devil?' and the images shift from us watching him, to a representation of his perceptions with Matt's colouring changing from mono-chrome to four colour to emphasise the change of perspective. Furthermore, Daredevil is an unusual superhero: he is blind, but has super-developed other senses. He has a superhuman radar sense that lets him know where objects are, so that in effect, he is

²⁵⁹ The Martha Washington series consists of Frank Miller (w) Dave Gibbons (a) *Give Me Liberty* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse 1991), *Martha Washington Goes to War* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 1994), and *Martha Washington Saves the World* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 1999). The series tells the story of a futuristic American revolution through the eyes of a black female protagonist.

²⁶⁰ Perhaps part of the reason why the technique is more successful here is because Miller is both writing and pencilling the comic. As such the separation between the levels of art and thought balloon is less pronounced.

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not actually blind, he just sees differently. Daredevil cannot read visually, but he is able to “read type” just by brushing his hand over the page as indicated by the *Time Magazine* present on his coffee table,

Unlike in the previous figure, the thought balloons on this page reinforce rather than take the role of the art. In the third panel down, the blue wavy lines are a visual representation of Matt’s hearing – the familiar symbol of a heart monitor’s display is here transposed into the background of the panel. Matt thinks: ‘My supersensitive hearing detects four distinct heartbeats in this room. No breathing, just the heartbeats.’ This is still gloss for the panel, but it effectively serves to clarify a visual representation of a heard phenomenon, reminding the reader that the image is of a culturally precise symbol for a heartbeat. Similarly, in panel four Miller uses the culturally accepted symbol for radar found on range finding equipment and popularised by any number of war films. This time the symbol is placed in the foreground and the background is replaced by the perception generated for Matt by this ability: in this case the outlines of the four ninja assassins sent to kill him. While the thought balloons are a distancing technique: the art of the panel purposely draws us into Matt’s perspective, and the comic engages us through his perceptions, so that in reading we take on an approximation of his (dis)ability. Working within the Marvel tradition, Miller uses the thought balloon in the manner of Claremont but far more efficiently.

In this page Miller has taken aspects of the dominant Marvel style and merged them with influences from other sources. His interest in Japanese manga and through that

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Japanese culture is well documented.²⁶¹ While this is more explicit in his *Ronin* series, in *Daredevil* the introduction of the ninja organisation 'The Hand' reflects the start of Miller's synthesis of the Japanese form of comics into the American mainstream. It is further identifiable in the layout of the panels.

The full-page-width horizontal panel is a technique often used in manga for action sequences and scene setting and Miller uses it here over an entire page, and continues it on the following page to show an action scene in which the defensive fighting of Matt fits a stretched horizontal design. Likewise on other pages he uses long vertical panels taken from the same set of influences. Miller's adoption of Japanese breakdowns is more than a simple reconfiguring of elements on the page; it represents a fundamental shift in the reader's relationship to time and movement in his comics.

Miller's use of these different layouts here also incorporates an adoption of a Japanese approach to panel transition. Scott McCloud argues, through a detailed content analysis, that manga uses a kind of transition, moment to moment, that rarely featured in Western comics.²⁶² In the figure we can see this used effectively, as the perspective of the panels moves around, we are not shifting from action to action but from moment to moment in the build up to the ninja's attack.²⁶³ Miller uses similar transitions again but sticks closer to the manga tradition, without changing perspective five pages later. Here a series of vertical panels are used to show moment to moment transitions in his conversation

²⁶¹ In the biography on the fan webpage *The Complete Works of Frank Miller* the author specifically references the influence of Japanese film-maker Akira Kurosawa and manga in an otherwise short description of Miller's career. See 'Frank Miller: a Short Bio'(online) at *The Complete Works of Frank Miller* available at <http://www.moebiusgraphics.com/miller.php> accessed 29/01/2009

²⁶² See McCloud 1993 op cit p. 80.

²⁶³ Some might argue that this is actually under McCloud's grouping of subject to subject transitions. However as the perspective moves, but the focus remains on Daredevil, I would argue that these remain moment to moment transitions.

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with his best friend Foggy. Miller synthesises two previously separate traditions of comic art, the kinetic superhero approach to form as formulated by Marvel and the slower character orientated approach of manga, expanding the range of visual tools available for the representation of time and movement, and thus narrative.

There are more influences from outside superhero comics on this page too. In the first panel we can see an emphasis on shadow and light that is drawn directly from film noir and Miller's is often described by fans as cinematic. I criticised this comparison across media at the beginning of the thesis, but it is apt here not in a formal analysis, but a stylistic one. Miller's shift of viewing angles is reminiscent of film and is a powerful way to focus on both character and action. His is not the first attempt to imitate the dynamism of film, but it is successful.²⁶⁴ The combination of influences from manga, film and the already successful Marvel style meant that *Daredevil* was an important contribution to the evolution of the genre. Through Matt, Miller developed a strong reader-in-the-text character bringing to it all the innovations in form he developed from Japanese comics and his tribute to noir film. He is without a doubt one of the most significant writers and artists (both together and separately) of the 1980s and yet without the influence of British creators from *2000AD*, his later work could not have happened, because, as with Claremont's work, *Daredevil* does not represent a shift in approach to social commentary.

Matt "Daredevil" Murdock may have come from working class roots, but in the action of the comic he is firmly ensconced in a middle class lifestyle. His friends are mainly

²⁶⁴ See Michael Chabon's 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Klay* (New York, London: Random House, 2000) in which he, in fictional form, suggests that it was Orson Welles film *Citizen Kane* (Mercury Productions, 1941) that first inspired dynamic use of perspective in comics. See also Will Eisner *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1996) p. 73 for an example of how imitating film can utterly fail.

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drawn from the echelons of the super-rich: he resides in a luxury brownstone townhouse decorated with expensive sculptures and complete with Olympic standard gym and acrobatics equipment. Miller's content was firmly in the established tradition of the American superhero. Bad guys were criminals, insane or both, and Daredevil's objective was simply to ensure that justice was served.²⁶⁵ Although Stephen Wiener argues that *Daredevil* 'signified ... that the content restriction imposed by the comics code were loosening.'²⁶⁶ The argument is only valid to the extent that Miller's comic used the space created by Stan Lee in the 1970s in a more sophisticated way than others had before, but it still remained true to Sabin's view of American censorship that 'above all the Code stipulated "no social relevance"'.²⁶⁷ *Daredevil*, violent and gritty was ground breaking but it was still a Code comic, it did not challenge the core conservative values at the heart of the censorship body's purpose.²⁶⁸ The challenge would come from British creators, firstly Alan Moore, but following him many of the key people from *2000AD*.

²⁶⁵ Wiener op cit p. 29

²⁶⁶ Wiener op cit p. 30

²⁶⁷ Sabin 1991 op cit p. 171

²⁶⁸ See Miller op cit 2001 unnumbered pages. The only argument to suggest that *Daredevil* was operating outside the bounds of the Code, but with its seal, is the character of Elektra. She is (one of) Matt's love interests, a skilled assassin and highly sexualised, independent woman. She is, in every way, a more interesting female character than the ones offered by Claremont and Byrne. Her role in the comic sets up a story line of a classic tragedy. Murdock and Elektra fall in love, her father is murdered by criminals and she becomes an assassin to take revenge. Thus their love starts before she becomes a criminal and provides tension when they both end up on opposing sides of the law. Ultimately, she sacrifices herself for him (more than once) and thus redeems herself. However, as Daredevil consistently opposes her criminality even considering their love, it reinforces, rather than undermines the core values of the code. As Matt says to her in the October 1981 issue 'You're a cold blooded assassin and I'm taking you in.'

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Swamp Thing

Of the creators who worked on *2000AD*, it was former underground artist Brian Bolland who was the first to become a “big name” artist in the US. From 1979, his comics covers established his reputation and he was one of the first artists to work on the new “maxi-series” format at DC Comics in the early 1980s.²⁶⁹ Bolland’s move from the UK to DC established that it was possible for the group of artists and writers forming around *2000AD* to get regular work in the US. He was followed in 1982 by Dave Gibbons another former British comix artist who had also started working at *2000AD* once the underground movement ran out of steam. Their connection with editors Len Wein and Karen Berger at DC Comics would be a key link that started the influx into the USA. Berger decided that it was not just British artists who could energise DC’s flagging sales, but British writers too:

The thing that attracted me to their point of view was that it was decidedly different from the American writers. They had more of an outsider's perspective and looked at the world differently. They brought an irreverence and a subversiveness to their work, and I really responded to that sensibility.²⁷⁰

It would be Berger who would bring British creators like Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman and Jamie Delano to US comics as executive editor of Vertigo, but it was Wein who first brought Moore to the US through a connection to Gibbons. Wein had seen Moore’s work

²⁶⁹ This “maxi-series” *Camelot 3000* was DC Comics’ first, it was structured as 12 comics issues that would form a complete and final story arc: Mike W. Barr (w) Brian Bolland (a) *Camelot 3000* (New York: DC Comics, 2008: 1982-5). What is interesting about *Camelot 3000* is that it foreshadows many of themes that were to come in mainstream US comics post Moore et al. Visually, it looks like *2000AD*, but the narrative feels like the British comics’ awkward cousin. It attempts to deal with adultery, transgendered people and homosexual relationships, but rather than an interesting exploration of the issues, these subthemes become an excuse for borderline pornography and what becomes a lesbian relationship between two characters fits quite clearly in the “voyeur” mode of women in comics.

²⁷⁰ Karen Berger interviewed by Jennifer M. Contino ‘A Touch of Vetigo’(online) *Sequential Tart* vol 4 iss. 1 January 2001 at <http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/feb01/berger.shtml> accessed 29/8/08

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for *Warrior* and secured his services for the hybrid superhero/horror title *Swamp Thing*.²⁷¹

Swamp Thing is accepted by many critics to be one of the most influential comics of the early 1980s.²⁷² A re-launch of an old title, the original had been written by Wein and lasted 24 issues from 1972 to 1976 before ending. While moderately successful at the time, it was hardly a huge hit. It was revamped to little acclaim in 1982 to cash in on a film with the same name.²⁷³ Again, it was not a great commercial success and the series was given to Alan Moore in late 1983 to write for the existing artists Steve Bissette and John Totleben. As a failing title it would be permissible to take risks that would be unacceptable in other comics with higher sales. Under Len Wein's editorship, Moore was given a brief to develop it in the style which had captured Wein's attention in the first place (Moore's work for *2000AD* and *Warrior*).

Moore's approach on *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is paradigmatic of what was to come from British creators working in the USA. He took an existing title, stripped it of its narrative history and reshaped central characters to fit his ambitions. His tenure on the comic would be an early example of the "star writer" trend identified by Reynolds and Brooker.²⁷⁴ Moore made *Swamp Thing* directly political, approaching specific problems in single issues or short storylines. He abandoned the dual address he had used in *2000AD*, in order to shape the story as an adult comic, which dealt explicitly and graphically with issues such as sexual abuse, drug use, race, gender, domestic violence, the economy and the

²⁷¹ Dave Gibbons 'Introduction' to Alan Moore et al. *DC Universe: The Stories of Alan Moore* (New York: DC Comics, 2006) p.8

²⁷² See Wiener op cit pp. 30-31; Sabin 1993 op cit pp. 77-78; Sabin op cit 1996 pp. 60-61

²⁷³ Ref Sabin 1993 op cit p. 215

²⁷⁴ See Reynolds op cit pp. 47-48 and Will Brooker *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a cultural icon* (New York, London: Continuum 1999) p. 263

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environment.²⁷⁵ It was his first major commission for a US publisher and made his name in the US industry. This comic, more than any other, opened up the possibilities and set the standards for and expectation of the British writers and artists. Equally as significant, it changed the idea of what could and should be done in a US comic with newsstand distribution.²⁷⁶

Although Moore's impact was immediate, it would not be until later that the "free reign" offered the writer was equated with abandoning the Comics Code. In September 1984, the story 'Love and Death' hit the shelves without Comics Code approval, and by 1985 the comic book's run from #35-42 starting with the 'Nuke Face Papers' and culminating with 'Strange Fruit' set a new standard for socio-political commentary in a mainstream American comic book. By this time, Moore was already an established name within industry circles and *Swamp Thing* a celebrated title and fan favourite. The code was still in use but publishers were increasingly finding ways around it. *Swamp Thing* then represented its effective death knell as the medium defining body that it had been.

On starting work on the comic, Moore's first decision was to rework the characters to invest them with greater psychological complexity and change the mode of engagement. To do this, he turned the origin story of the protagonist on its head. Reynolds describes this as typical of new creators taking over a character 'a new writer/artist team will be expected to have a shot at redefining a character's origin story'.²⁷⁷ Moore's alterations went beyond this typical feature of a new creative team; he fundamentally changed the basic concept of

²⁷⁵ Sabin highlights his attention to: 'US gun laws, feminism and multinational economics' 1993 op cit p. 77

²⁷⁶ See Neil Gaiman's Introduction' in Alan Moore (w), Steve Bissette (a) John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing: Love and Death* (New York: DC Comics, 1990)

²⁷⁷ Reynolds op cit p. 47

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the character setting a new standard of flexibility for existing superheroes.²⁷⁸ In the original *Swamp Thing* an explosion in a lab blows the botanist Alec Holland into the Louisiana swamp with some of his miracle plant growth serum. The result is a human plant hybrid desperately seeking to restore its humanity. In Moore's version, the same event takes place only instead of producing a human/plant crossbreed; it creates a plant creature that mistakenly thinks it is human.

This change altered the entire milieu of the series. Once the creature realises that he is not and never was human, there is an abrupt value shift. Instead of a story of lost humanity and alienation, the "plant elemental", which we learn that Alec Holland/Swamp Thing is, becomes a sentient champion of the world's ecosphere. In this way the stage is set for a comic to deal with social conflict ostensibly from the perspective of plants. There are two obvious consequences of this. The first is that ecological and environmental concerns get fore-grounded throughout the comics run: Swamp Thing pacifies the violent Flouronic man; the dramatic and immediate effect Nuke Face has on Swamp Thing; Swamp Thing's confrontation with Batman and Gotham city; and later in his involvement with the environmental group set up by Chester.²⁷⁹ Second, Moore, drawing on his experience with the construction of the sympathetic Evey in *V for Vendetta*, and the relationship between Evey and V, turns the Swamp Thing's alienation into an asset for the series, forcing an identification with the Other, while also creating a sympathetic everywoman character to ground that Other to the world.

²⁷⁸ This is the comic in which the standard was set for what Frank Miller would then do with Batman or Grant Morrison with Animal Man to name two examples.

²⁷⁹ See Alan Moore (w) Steve Bissette (a) John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing Volumes 1-6* (New York: DC Comics, 1990-2003)

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The gender of the characters is important in both cases. In *V For Vendetta*, the possibility of a romantic relationship is held in tension with Evey's fantasy that V may be her father.²⁸⁰ In *Swamp Thing* it is perhaps more complex, Swamp Thing "himself" is technically neither male nor female, but is a plant spirit that bears both flowers and fruit.²⁸¹ That Swamp Thing assumes a male identity is a function of his relationship with Abby, which takes on some of the characteristics of romantic heterosexual monogamy. It is through this that Swamp Thing remains connected to society and to the extent that he is, observes social mores. This traditional gendered role of the husband/protector shapes STs attitude to the relationship and the ways he reconnects to the world. Thus, Abby repeatedly takes on the counter-role of the damsel in distress. This is perhaps a key difference to the other female characters looked at before in the thesis: far from challenging gender roles, Swamp Thing behaves somewhat conservatively in this regard.

Although the relationship between ST and Abby is heteronormative, Abby herself does not conform to the role of superhero's love interest as drawn in many earlier comics: she is neither helpless, nor eager to be saved; she is not defined by her relationship but exists within a specific socio-economic context; Abby does not have access to limitless financial resources and has a career at first at an autistic children's home and later working with the elderly (that these are conventional female caring professions may be indicative of Abby's role in Swamp Thing's life).²⁸² She may come from a line of warlocks and necromancers, but in general she is a normal human woman thrust into exceptional

²⁸⁰ See chapter 5

²⁸¹ For simplicity's sake when I refer to Swamp Thing with the male pronoun, I will not use scare quotes.

²⁸² In some ways this could be seen as a typical difference between US and British popular narrative. In the USA popular culture often focuses on the wealthy while in the UK on the working class. The paradigm for this would be comparing the soap operas *Eastenders* and *Dallas*. Superheroes largely follow these trends.

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circumstance through her relationships both familial and intimate. Yet while her depiction may be subversive, her role is not. As Superman relies on first his parents, and then Lois Lane to keep him attached to the human race, time and again Swamp Thing repeats the mantra that it is only Abby that keeps him tethered to the world of humans and away from the world of plants. It is for Abby that he chooses not to join a ‘parliament of trees’ made up of other plant elementals who have given up all connection to the world and live like trees in the Amazonian rain forest.

Abby’s gendered construction is inflected by class: she is a fairly conventional working class woman in the southern states. She is not the stay-at-home wife of golden age suburbia, but an underpaid woman in traditional service-type work. Her position draws attention to the way in which social constructions of gender are played out culturally and economically. The intrinsic conservatism of her relationship with Swamp Thing serves to highlight the gendering of the roles she takes on in her work. The prejudices she suffers as a woman and the specific and limited opportunities on offer to her, drives several of the shorter storylines notably those involving the care homes she works at, and the media attacks she endures when news of her relationship with Swamp Thing emerges. Like in (the roughly contemporary) *Halo Jones* gender and class become linked sites of oppression.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Abby and Swamp Thing does not feed this critique directly; instead it offers a route into a critical exploration of environmental issues. The idea of a plant monster is a convention used to foreground a clash between two ultimately human perspectives, capitalism and a certain kind of alternative environmentalism epitomised by Swamp Thing. In some ways this conflict is primordial, a

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metaphor for the conflict between civilisation and the wild that has precedents in fiction going back as far as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Marina Warner argues that this conflict historically follows a pattern in legends of pairs of characters (sometimes twins) meeting, fighting and then becoming friends. Sooner or later one of them dies and the other desperately tries to restore them to life representing an attempt to resolve the dialectic between culture and nature that is fundamental to human society.²⁸³ The relationship in *Swamp Thing* can be understood this way, Abby and Swamp Thing are bound together (in this case through love) and must challenge, and recover from, the death of one or the other at various points. Swamp Thing repeats the myth of Persephone, travelling into Hades to retrieve Abby, but must return from a virtual death of his own to restore himself to her.²⁸⁴

Although the two together represent the ideal bonding of civilisation and the wild, Abby keeps going back to civilisation despite wanting to remain, with Swamp Thing, in the swamp. She cannot be wholly of either world and Swamp Thing cannot provide for her entirely. As a plant he does not participate in the human economy and thus cannot furnish her with all her, very human, material needs. Yet, it is civilisation that attacks her and she must be rescued each time by the wild.

These themes play into what becomes a wider polemic against the socio-political landscape of America. The contrast between Swamp Thing's impassive "plant" perspective and an interpretation of 1980s American culture that emphasises cynicism and greed is pervasive in several ways. As a comic that deliberately attempts to engage in human social

²⁸³ See Marina Warner *Six Myths of Our Time: Managing Monsters: The Reith Lectures 1994* (London: Vintage, 1994) pp. 49-63

²⁸⁴ See *Swamp Thing* Vol 2 p. 139 for Abby restored to life and Vol. 5-6 much later in the run for Swamp Thing's own journey through space to reunite himself with his lover.

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events from the perspective of a non-human who is involved in the world through his contact with Abby (and later with the working class English demon hunter John Constantine) the logic of the narrative demands an automatic questioning of social priorities. The critique of society from the perspective of “nature” is part of a wider trend identified by Marina Warner in popular narratives of the 1980s and early 1990s:

The threat of entropy in nature, brought about by human achievements – by the car, the aerosol, the nuclear reactor, pesticides and genetic interference [all themes in *Swamp Thing*, except the aerosol] – has never been so serious nor perhaps – even in times of millennial fever – so acutely felt. Nature, newly understood to be somehow uncontaminated, innocent, nurturing and spontaneous, beckons as a remedy to the distortions and excesses of progress.²⁸⁵

Individually each storyline (or sometimes each individual comic) in *Swamp Thing* tends to focus on one aspect of the conflict between nature and culture, but collectively Moore, Tottleben and Bissette’s run constitutes a wide-ranging yet consistent critique of the dominant mode of capitalism. “Culture”, in both the broad meaning of the organisation and practices of human society, and a historically specific moment of that society, is under attack in the comic. This is not an attack that aims at defeat, but one that struggles for the co-existence of the two conceptual realms of culture and nature. The comic focuses on this in a specific way. It centres its critique not just on environmental degradation and the need for that to cease, but also on the plight of those that fail to benefit from the “trickle-down effect” of Reaganomics. This two pronged approach enables the comic to raise the issues of poverty and inequality exacerbated by the changes in economic and fiscal priority of the

²⁸⁵ Warner op cit p. 55. *Swamp Thing* is theoretically more powerful singularly than virtually the whole of civilisation combined as he says to the ransomed citizens of Gotham while trying to rescue Abby yet again: ‘If nature were to shrug or raise an eyebrow then you should all be gone’. Alan Moore(w), John Tottleben(a), Rick Veitch (a) *Swamp Thing: Earth to Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) p. 42

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time while maintaining its overall framing within an environmental discourse.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ Reaganomics is the idea that cutting taxes for the richest in society improves everyone's economic standing by a) incentivising people to make money and b) increasing overall spending on new products thus opening up growth in new industries. It also relies on increased public spending – in the 1980s this was on military projects. It is based around supply-side economic theory.

'Love and Death'

As the complexity of *Swamp Thing*'s narrative increased, the titles ambitions for social commentary and more explicit horror content meant that it was challenging the strictures of the Comics Code. Issue #29 of *Saga of The Swamp Thing* titled 'Love and Death' was the moment when the editors either had to reign in the creative team or make a drastic, industry changing decision. They chose the latter and 'Love and Death' made *Swamp Thing* 'the first DC comic book with newsstand distribution to go out on a monthly basis without the "Comics Code Authority Seal of Approval"'.²⁸⁷ In terms of the relationship between the comics industry and its censorship body, this made the issue at least as significant as Lee's 1971 *Spider-Man* drugs plot-line.

The story itself is firmly in what David Hartwell terms 'the psychological metaphor' mould of horror. However, on a less explicit level it also serves as what he terms a moral allegory (in this case that morality is complex rather than what Hartwell sees as a kind of 'moral calculus' typical of the genre).²⁸⁸ Building on a back story of Abby and her unemployed husband Matt's struggle to succeed financially; the narrative takes shape as a deeply personal trauma, framed in terms of incest and sexual abuse.

At first Abby does not realise that her husband has been possessed by her uncle Anton Arcane. The Matt/Anton character gets a job in what appears to be a financial services firm of some description: 'Blackriver Recorporations Inc'. After presenting her

²⁸⁷ Neil Gaiman 'Love and Death: Overture' in Alan Moore (w), Stephen Bissette (a), John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing: Love and Death* (New York: DC Comics, 1990) p. 7

²⁸⁸ David G. Hartwell 'Introduction' in David G. Hartwell (ed.) *The Dark Descent: The Evolution of Horror* (New York: Tor, 1987) p. 8

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with a luxurious new home filled with the latest white goods, flowers and expensive upholstery, he takes her to his new office to meet ‘the whole sick crew’ (p. 41). In an instant, Matt has gone from being a borderline alcoholic and workshy lay-about spending his time abusing his magical ability to create any image he desires (mainly elaborate erotic fantasies(p. 64)), to a high-flying success story of a liberalised economy, who is providing his wife with every luxury the logic of capitalist success could require. The change is, of course, due to Abby’s uncle. As the reality of the new Matt slowly dawns on Abby, in distress she wonders why she did not ask what “recorporations” meant (p. 43 and p. 48).

The implication is that the firm’s name refers to an obscure financial practice: the tautology of “corporation” and “inc” adding to the illusion. This, like many large commercial operations in the comic series, is not what it seems. The ‘Blackriver’ is the Styx and ‘recorporations’ are not complex financial transactions, but the return of damned souls to their bodies. It is an elaborate pun recalling at once repossession of property and, considering the luxurious mansion got by nefarious means, opposing “mortgage” the etymology of which is from the French ‘mort’ for death, and gage for ‘pledge’. The promise of your repayments ending with death is no longer a pledge to be kept.

In essence, the company is a conduit for those in Hell to return to the Earth and conquer it. It has been opened by Anton Arcane and the staff is composed of serial killers who have been “recorporated” from Hell. Arcane has performed a “recorporation” himself in two senses. Firstly he has convinced Matt Cable, Abby’s husband into giving him his body, “recorporating” himself. Secondly he is performing “recorporations” on others: at first the staff, but as the storyline progresses a number of damned souls, ‘the aristocracy of hell’ (p. 85). In this manner, a set of relations involving body switching in which

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oppositions between the dead and living, the financial and the intimate are established and further developed through casting the set of events as a dream into which the blossoming relationship between Abby and Swamp Thing is interwoven. This then places us on a further level of juxtaposition between the dream and reality which will be extended to include a play on the notion of fiction itself.

Figure 26 shows the height of Abby's nightmare. Having realised who inhabits the body of her husband (and by whom she has been "seduced" back into the marital bed) she dreams of furiously attempting to cleanse herself. Formally, the dream sequence occurs on two levels. In the middle of the page is a sequence of five panels with white gutters between them and framed in black. The five central panels demonstrate helplessness, an inability to undo what has already done (that is her seduction by her uncle in the guise of her husband). What is telling about them is the way in which she attempts to cleanse herself. First she tears off her clothes burning or destroying them, then she tries to use perfume to remove 'the stench' and finally attacks herself with a scouring pad on wire. The reassurance that this is "just a dream" is then undone on the following page, when as Abby wakes up in the kitchen, her self-inflicted wounds from her dream have become real.

These panels emphasise the nature of her defilement by her uncle as physical, and that her experience of the incestuous encounters is something profoundly internal in a bodily way. She cannot cleanse herself by any means of what, in the dream, manifests itself as a stench. The psychological impact of her rape returns in the dream as disgust for her own body. She who walked willingly and innocently into her evil uncle's bed places the blame for her seduction on herself and enacts that shame physically. Yet it is her husband

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who sold his soul and with it her body as well as his.²⁸⁹

The dream sequence and its affect on physical reality is where the themes of the supernatural, the psychological and the social become interwoven. The three objects used by Abby to clean her body place her in relation to a consumer culture that attempts to rectify all our problems through symbolic investment in material items. Of course, here, under these circumstances it utterly fails. Her clothing, particularly her bra and knickers represent her sexuality; the branded perfume 'Forever Amber' (punning on petrified sap, a kind of twisted reference to Swamp Thing and his almost undead status as a plant that thinks it is a dead man) represents a failure of cosmetic goods to affect a deeper sense of self; and the scouring pad symbolises modern domesticity.²⁹⁰ The concerns are transposed from an economic setting to a mythical/quasi-religious one, but the emphasis is on the effect that it has on both body and soul. However much they are considered separate the division fails: the body is corrupted, the soul damned to Hell. In a sense while the new house and her husband's new wealth represent the dream of success in neo-liberal America, this dream of "the good life" under a supply-side economy becomes a nightmare, literally equated with "selling out" to the Devil.²⁹¹

The sequence is embedded within a page sized panel that shows Abby asleep at the bottom while anthropomorphic insects swarm around her. Where she appears in the

²⁸⁹ The parallel being that in going into the snake pit of corporate finance is often described as "selling out" or selling your soul to the devil. Here Matt has literally done that, except he also sold his body to the devil who is Abby's uncle.

²⁹⁰ A theme picked up in the exploration of menstruation and commoditisation in 'The Red House'. See Alan Moore (w) Steve Bissette (a) John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing: The Curse* (New York: DC Comic, 2000)

²⁹¹ Supply-side economics is the economic theory that by creating a tax regime that privileges the producers of goods and services wealth will be generated faster in the wider economy. This theory relies on two things: a ready supply of people to buy these additions products and the idea that this newly generated wealth will not remain concentrated in the hands of the owners of the producing companies.

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background panel in miniature she seems to be in a direct struggle with the insects. Nearly all of these images have sexual connotations suggesting she is being/about to be raped or eaten by the insects. In the top right corner of the page a portrait of Alan Moore stares out, his eyes focused directly on the reader.²⁹² Moore's face is attached to a demonic body that grasps the uppermost mini-Abby in his hand. The inclusion of the writer by the artists further disturbs an already complex page. It is at once occurring between the dream and the "normal" narrative level of the fiction, two levels of the dream, and now, by the explicit inclusion of the author (whose gaze points at the reader), between the actual reality of the reader and the fiction of the text.²⁹³ It functions similarly to Animal Man seeing and addressing the reader (see chapter 3). By moving the page out of the hermetic world of the narrative, the writer appearing in the text puts the question of fiction itself into play.

The blood red face would only be recognisable to people who knew what Alan Moore looked like: at the time of publication this would have meant industry insiders and hardcore fans. Interpreting this background detail is not essential to understanding the connotations of the page or indeed the narrative. Yet it does demonstrate a consciousness of both the changing nature of fan culture at the time towards celebrity authors (as opposed to anonymous ones) and more generally that the reader is encouraged to become aware of the page as fiction and to think about its purpose.²⁹⁴

²⁹² This is known as an 'Easter egg': a hidden detail included for fans to reward close attention and specialised fan knowledge. See 'Easter Egg' (online) *Urban Dictionary* available at <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Easter+Egg>. Accessed 29/01/2009

²⁹³ This is the second time this happens, the first, as Gaiman points out on page 8 is on page 48, but it less striking.

²⁹⁴ In fact what this constitutes is perhaps one of the establishing moments of Moore's relationship with fans. Or perhaps more accurately it is a textual iteration of Moore's public persona. This itself is a fiction carefully cultivated by "the warlock (or wizard) of Northampton", the beard, long hair and drilling stare all part of the effect. See, for instance, Suzanna Clark (interview) 'Alan Moore: The Wonderful Wizard of

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The uncanny effect on the reader of the play on fiction and dreams is carefully constructed: the flow of reading on the page is along the narrative panels before turning to the detail of the background. Looking at the intricate imagery behind the five panel dream sequence, the focus is clearly placed on the sleeping form of Abby at the bottom, the details then draw the readers eye around the bottom from right to left, up the left hand side before ending at Moore's face in the top right. While the use of a multi-panel inset is innovative, this use of the slower paced reading style typical of the focus on art in American comics gives the page a gravitas appropriate to the subject and draws out both the supernatural elements and the traumatic psychological subtheme.

The whole of the story is woven around a further minor sequence, either part of Abby's dream, another dream, this time Swamp Thing's, or events contemporaneous to her sleep. It shows Swamp Thing investigating what seems to be a bird twitching on the forest floor. The bird is dead, but what makes it twitch, we learn on the final pages of the issue, is that it is 'full of bugs' (p56). This is awkward symbolism: insects feeding on corpses are a perfectly normal, natural phenomenon and it is not something that Swamp Thing is usually uncomfortable with or surprised by. Indeed at one point, while on a walk with Abby, he takes a dead bird and places it inside his body stating that: 'Death shall nourish life and nothing shall be wasted.'²⁹⁵ Yet here when he first sees it is full of insects he recoils in shock.

The bird and Matt occupy the same conceptual (but not emotional space) in the

Northampton' *Daily Telegraph* 7 October 2007 available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/10/07/sv_alanmoore.xml&page=1 accessed 17/11/2008

²⁹⁵ Moore (w), Totleben (a), Bissette (a) *Swamp Thing: The Curse* (New York: DC Comics, 2000) p.154. Alternately, this second bird could be seen as the final part of the healing process that Abby and Swamp Thing require after the events in the issues of the comic discussed here.

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fiction. Like the bird, Matt only appears alive: he is possessed by another creature. But in contrast to human deceit and malice, the natural cannot lie, it can only trick our perception and thus in some ways the bird fails to provide an apt parallel. What appears the same in nature is in fact a normal process of decay. The corruption of Arcane in his possession of Matt is of a different order.

The metaphor, a “literary” use of the comics form, is significant regardless of its awkwardness. The comic deploys a poetic sensibility combining visual diegesis and accompanying verbal narration. The use of the bird metaphor is an attempt to transcend the normal expectations of mainstream comics at this time and it does so while reinforcing the environmental connection. This poetic approach to the comics form is a sign of growing ambition for the medium and if it is clumsy here, it became more successful as the 1980s progressed.²⁹⁶ Although in terms of the literal strength of the analogy it may not succeed, but in terms of weaving a repeated motif of death, corruption and deception through imagery of insects, the narrative theme of possessed bodies, and the visual interpretation of trauma, it is an effective way of re-contextualising in the mundane world human anguish that would otherwise figure as a supernatural oddity.

²⁹⁶ Grant Morrison (w) and Dave McKean (a) *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (London: Titan Books 2004 [1989]) would be one example as would Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* (op cit) series which deliberately played up literary parallels. These are both examples of British Invasion writers and artists working in the USA.

'Rite of Spring'

Following on from 'Love and Death', the story continues with Abby gloatingly murdered by her uncle Arcane (pp. 54-55), after which he is confronted by Swamp Thing who first dispatches the warlock and then ventures down to Hell to rescue her. He brings her back and a new status quo is established. Abby and Swamp Thing are a couple; her husband Matt, purged of Arcane, is in a coma (who, with his last conscious breath, helped to save Abby - an uncomfortable play on two vegetative partners for Abby) and the supernatural in the form of Hell and the underworld is established as a key motif in the narrative arc.

That Swamp Thing has rescued Abby from Hell is significant. On one level this is a lover rescuing his partner, on another it is nature correcting the gross ambition of modern capitalism – saving its victims and condemning the souls of the perpetrators. In the context of the story arc, the battle in Hell is an establishing moment in Swamp Thing progression. The protagonist gains a group of marginal superheroes as supporting characters, most linked to either to the afterlife or magic of some sort: for instance the Demon Etrigan who speaks only in verse.

The resolution of this major event in the continuity of the series allowed a pause to consider the implications of what had happened so far in relation to the major characters. In the March 1985 issue titled 'Rite of Spring' we see Abby and Swamp Thing together, free to explore his new abilities and sense of self as a plant elemental rather than as Alec Holland. The issue deals with Abby and Swamp Thing's romantic relationship and is an exploration of their intimacy. As Swamp Thing is fundamentally a conscious plant (or more

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specifically a plant consciousness), it is not possible for them to have a functioning sexual relationship. Instead, as they experiment with the shape their intimate relations will take, Swamp Thing grows tubers within his body (specifically close to where his heart would be) which Abby then eats to share in his perceptions. Much of the issue takes the form of Abby seeing the world through Swamp Thing's eyes, a psychedelic adventure in nature that recalls the underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s and paves the way for the psychedelic sequence from Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* that was analysed in Chapter 3.

By figure 27 we can see Abby deep into merging consciousness with Swamp Thing. As the intensity of the experience increases, the page has rotated so by the time we come to this double page spread the page has re-orientated from the vertical to the horizontal. As Abby's world has shifted so too has the reader's, literally, as we physically have to turn the comic book in our hands. This, like the address through staring eyes, is a breaching of the fourth wall in comics. The events on the page, albeit in a minor way, interject into the world outside of the fiction.

The figure as a whole is constructed around the key technique emphasised repeatedly in the close analyses of this thesis. The page is framed at the top by Swamp Thing's disembodied eyes staring directly at the reader. Unlike other times we have seen the use of eyes in this way, where it has been to encourage the reader to engage the narrative through the character: in this case it is an invitation to enter the scene presented, to attempt to imagine the kind of impossible state of consciousness shown on the page. It mirrors the sorts of representations of taking LSD found in 1970s comix, but on another level its emphasis is on a realism that while drawing upon the psychedelic, is only being approximated through this reference. The figure is an attempt at presenting the experience

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of the merging of minds rather than a depiction of what is happening in the scene, thus it is as much in the realm of simulation as representation.

The page starts at the top with long vertical panels that show the lovers splashing in the water, but the formal panel structure quickly disappears into a watery milieu in which the lovers' minds are intertwined. This movement out of the formal structure of comics panels and into a freeform series of merged images reflects their transcendence of conventional physicality and the comic's attempt break the confines of the medium. While unconventional, the page still follows top to bottom reading conventions and the pathway we are intended to take through the pictures is guided by an equally abstract set of captions. The verbal components move through Abby's thoughts, and occasionally Swamp Thing's, combining and dividing as indicated by the fragments of text that are placed within boxes. Both characters are present but become indistinct as separate entities both through the images and the text.

The flow of images simulates the perceptions of the pair in their conjoined state or takes on symbolic connotations of their experience. If Abby is featured more than Swamp Thing, it is partly because the plant elemental frames the whole scene through his eyes. Abby is the human in the experience and thus it must be her who mediates out understanding of it, hence the focus on her. While a reading could be suggested that Abby's increased presence, naked, is not dissimilar to the kind of voyeurism we saw in the work of Chris Claremont and John Byrne, it would be hard to sustain through the more modest way she is drawn as compared to Storm and the gender-inverting sexual-symbolism present throughout the page.

Sex acts between the couple are implied but never actually depicted, nor are we

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intended to assume penetrative sex actually occurred between them as Swamp Thing tentatively states: 'You are human... you need more from love than the taste of lime [from his kiss]' (p. 42). Moreover when Abby leaves the lagoon at the end of the experience she is fully clothed as she was when she entered. However, the scene is framed on the left by a pair of mating toads and on the right by an earth worm entering a pink hole. While the connotations of the toads are obvious, their amphibious reproduction suggestive but not erotic, the crass symbolism of the worm is remedied by the way it modifies the image of Abby diving into water on the bottom right of the page through a perfect circular splash "hole" she has made in the surface. The juxtaposition of the worm and the woman both penetrating something places Abby in a more conventionally male sexual role: 'A tide of emeralds engulfs me. I am falling into him' she says. On a wider scale, a further inversion takes place as the page becomes a birthing canal with the conjoined hands forming a cervix and the new unity of Swamp Thing and Abby being born in a tide of water. Framed as this is between the staring red eyes of Swamp Thing, and the fact that the experience has been triggered by the eating of a tuber produced in his chest, suggests it is his labour: never actually male to begin with, ST becomes a more female figure and this is made explicit on the following page as we see a more slender Swamp Thing with breasts next to a more masculine Abby who is literally penetrating the world (p. 200). Considering the conservative way their relationship has been structured previously, this experience could suggest that the previous male/dominant female/passive gender roles both had taken on were a product of the society Abby lived in. Free to celebrate their relationship in the wild, the roles are both challenged and reversed.

We can draw a parallel to the 'Love and Death' story. Both have a theme of bodies

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switching and merging, but in radically different ways with equally different outcomes. On the one hand 'Love and Death' featured people taking forced control of others bodies or returning that which is dead to life; on the other hand 'Rite of Spring' shows a couple literally sharing with their entire consciousnesses. Thematically we can place this in relation to the historic culture/nature divide or in this case a more contemporary political form of that dialectic environmentalism vs. capitalism. The associations work according to the logic of the binary. A simple table serves to illustrate:

Nature	Culture
Environmentalism	Capitalism
Love	Death
Intimacy	Rape
Reproduction	Murder
New life	Undeath
Merging consciousness	Reincorporation and possession
Sharing	Taking
Consent	Force

Following on from this page some of these elements become unified. In the following pages, death returns in its natural form as part of the cycle of life as predator feasts on prey and continents move: 'The world pulses and shudders with life ... and death with tide ... and magma.. with me ... with him.'²⁹⁷ Fundamentally then the sequence in 'Rites of Spring' is healing for the characters. It enables them to exorcise the trauma inflicted by Anton

²⁹⁷ Moore et al 1991 op cit pp. 202-203

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Arcane and their journey to Hell and back. It is a complete defeat of the things that ‘Love and Death’ put into play, a resolution of the environmentalism/capitalism conflict, not through a synthesis of the two sets of values but by a wholesale absorption of the necessary parts of the binary that fell under the “culture” heading.

The peaceful resolution that comes at the end of ‘Rites of Spring’ is a short lived phenomenon, but enables the story arc to develop as John Constantine the English demon hunter is introduced to help Swamp Thing explore his capabilities and role in the world as protector of the “green”. This in turn puts the story-line in a different, closer mode where a sequence of issues inverting horror staples such as zombies, werewolves, vampires and ghosts is used to explore in detail race, gender, cultural difference and gun culture respectively. In each example, the supernatural creatures occupy an ambiguous place in the scheme of things. The stories follow a formula where Swamp Thing starts as an observer before reaching an ambivalent solution to the problem. Our sympathies are filtered through his asocial perspective to lie mostly with the monsters. In each example Swamp Thing helps to save society, but with a certain level of reluctance. The more general themes developed in the storyline we have analysed in detail here give these later comics an ideological coherence that continues to explore the nature/culture binary with an interrogative tone that challenges fundamental assumptions about social priorities.

Swamp Thing represented something new in mainstream American comics; it presented a narrative from an environmental perspective that was clearly oppositional to the political ‘centre’ that Reynolds identified most DC and Marvel comics were conceived within. In exploring this perspective a number of different cultural certainties got thrown into question. Building on the work Moore was doing on *Halo Jones* and *V for Vendetta* it

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explored gender in a subtle way that both utilised the standard sexist myths around conventional structures in relationships and then subverted them, creating a complex relationship between the demands of society and Abby and Swamp Thing's experience of intimacy. Moreover Moore, Bissette and Tottleben used the staples of the horror genre: demons, possession, vampires, werewolves and zombies either antagonistically to shed light on the excesses and oppressiveness of social values or sympathetically to underline commonly held prejudices and hypocrisy. Very rarely is American culture shown in a positive light, the sympathetic characters throughout the series are all outsiders and outcasts: Chester is a drug dealer, John Constantine inhabits a world beyond normal human comprehension and Batman is a vigilante outsider. *Swamp Thing* managed to present a consistently alternative world view and in doing so challenged not just the values of the dominant superhero narratives of the time, but also the manner in which those stories could be presented in the comics medium.

Chapter 7: Revolution of *The Dark Knight*: Formal and thematic shifts in the work of Frank Miller as a result of the 2000AD group influence

After the success of *Swamp Thing* Alan Moore would go on to write one of the defining comic books of the 1980s combining with Dave Gibbons to produce the critically acclaimed *Watchmen*. This comic is perhaps the text that is most widely considered to have established British writers and artists in the US, but as such it is also by a creative team transposed directly from the pages of British comics. Thus although it may have resonance for this thesis, what is more at stake in this final chapter is the impact that the British approach to comics had on the thematic changes and uses of the comics form on the American mainstream. As such, I return to the work of Frank Miller. The central influence of the 2000AD approach can be seen clearly in 1986 through his critically acclaimed comic *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (TDKR). It is to this comic that I turn in my final analysis as it demonstrates the important, but partial, influence that the British movement had on the most celebrated mainstream writer/artist of the period.

Unlike the other comics in this thesis, which have received mainly scant or passing critical attention (although with the film version of *V for Vendetta* nearly 4 years old this is changing as I write), *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* has received possibly more scholarly consideration than any other superhero comic. While some material focuses specifically on the comic itself, much appears in conjunction with commentary on the various film versions or is located within the study of the wider Batman brand.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ Will Brooker *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a cultural icon* (New York, London: Continuum 1999) looks at TDKR as part of the longer history of Batman using it as an example of the changing fan culture around

There is some work that approaches the issue from a similar perspective: Jordana Greenblatt, for example, has offered a very strong comparative reading between *V for Vendetta* and *TDKR*, but none have attempted to explore or explain the origins of the stylistic shift that *TDKR* marks from Miller's earlier work.²⁹⁹ Greenblatt herself presents a compelling case for different representations of the 'iconic Child' in the work of Moore and Miller, but does not look to a relationship of influence between them, focusing instead on the similarity and difference between *V*'s Evey and *TDKR*'s Carrie (aka Robin).³⁰⁰ This an important question, but it is just as important to understand that Carrie builds on Casey from Miller's earlier work *Ronin* and finds strength in execution through an exposure to Evey from *V* and *Swamp Thing*'s Abby.

The notion of biographical influence is only tangential to what is at stake here; authorial intention is not of primary interest. Indeed Miller himself does not present particularly compelling readings of his own work, instead in interviews he is seemingly caught up in a myth of his own brilliance. Nevertheless, Miller does indirectly credit Alan Moore as a critical influence on his work. In his early 1990s interview with Christopher Sharrett, Miller sings the refrain 'Alan and I' repeatedly while looking to the superiority of their work to everything else that was being produced in the field.³⁰¹ Miller sees a

the time. Examples of the range of places it is also addressed David Levernz 'The Last Real Man in America: From Natty Bumppo to Batman' in *American Literary History* Vol. 3 No. 4 (OUP 1991); Peter Havholm and Philip Sandifer 'Corporate Authorship: A Response to Jerome Christensen' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

²⁹⁹ Greenblatt op cit

³⁰⁰ Ibid para. 19

³⁰¹ Christopher Sharrett 'Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller' in Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical approaches to superhero and his media* (New York, London: Routledge and BFI, 1991)

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fundamental difference between his work and Moore's framing it, rightly, as perspectives rooted in viewpoints from different continents:

Alan and I have had *many* conversations on the subject. My main comment was that I saw *Dark Knight* as profoundly American and *Watchmen* profoundly British, In *Watchmen* you can't help but see American icons reworked from a very European point of view.³⁰²

And yet, while claiming a great creative friendship, Miller fails to acknowledge the manner in which Moore and his compatriots have influenced his work. When assessing the ideological perspective of his Batman he seems to present a reading that is at odds with what happens in his own text, stating that Batman represents his own romantic ideal of the hero: 'I don't believe that governments or committees or political movements accomplish much. I believe that people do, individually... I think we're at our best when we're autonomous.'³⁰³ Yet *TDKR* ends with Batman gathering a horde of young delinquents to fight crime having been forced to realise that his single handed heroics no longer have a place in the world. It is hardly a fitting end to the individualistic narrative that Miller *wants* his comic to be. In fact, as we will see, while critics such as Mike Dubose see Batman as a character 'who would typically fit the stereotype of conservative/Republican', and Miller himself discusses the comic as an inadvertent flirting with fascism, by the end of *TDKR* the politics of the superhero himself actually seems to be far closer to Bolshevism ideologically.³⁰⁴

Although the politics manifests itself differently, I would argue that *Dark Knight Returns* demonstrates, both through its themes and its techniques, the definite influence of

³⁰² Ibid p. 45

³⁰³ Ibid p. 43

³⁰⁴ Mike S. Dubose 'Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, ComicBook Vigilantes, and Captain America' *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 40, No. 6, (Chichester: Wiley, 2007) p. 920

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the British writers and artists emerging at that time and specifically the work of Alan Moore on *Swamp Thing* and *V for Venedetta*, as well as a heavy reliance on *2000AD*'s main export - Judge Dredd. Miller may well not have been consciously aware of the manner in which the comics influenced his work but the text itself is revealing. Miller's readings of his own work remain valid (albeit oddly selective), just as any reader's reading of any text is valid. My reading here, which sits in and amongst all the other work that has been done on *TDKR* looks at that relationship of intertextual influence and the politics it helped produce. While it is not the only interpretation possible, it is the one that is suggested by the general thread of the argument advanced in this thesis and is demonstrable through the text itself. Thus, if there is a general agreement amongst scholars and critics that between *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* the expectations of mainstream comics changed entirely (or perhaps as Sabin puts it with different emphasis 'formed the basis for an expanded collector culture in the late 1980s and 1990s'³⁰⁵), this chapter stands to reinforce the central argument in the thesis that the British influence changed the parameters of the American mainstream within the frame of that critical consensus.

Nevertheless there are limits in translating an essentially British approach to an American context, and this translation, as we will see, was imperfect. While Dumbrell's idea of a distinct 'culture area' stated in the introduction is important, it is necessary to look at the limitations of this idea and the fact that in the 1980s the prevailing idea of what constituted "radical" in the USA and UK were quite different. While Britain's politics had, up until the 1980s at least, been primarily driven by a class based politics, in the USA the location of political tension was more commonly found in race. In some respects, while

³⁰⁵ Sabin op cit 1993 p94

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British writers had looked to race as a “new” political area (as we saw in *RoboHunter*) what we can see in Miller’s work as the decade progressed is a rediscovery of a discourse on class. Thus the “newness” of Miller in the mid 1980s can partly be understood in those terms and that introduction of a class discourse (consciously or not) is perhaps the key thematic manifestation of the British influence.

Another partial proviso to the argument is that we can see from Miller’s work that while many of the innovations found in the UK were formed as part of a movement that changed the face of British mainstreams comics, some of those ideas, concepts and techniques had emerged at the same time in the US, although perhaps without the same level of impact. To demonstrate how these influences might have operated and the shift from experimentation with outside influences to a fully fledged re-imagination of what constituted mainstream out-put we will look at an extract from *Ronin* that sits between Miller’s work on *Daredevil* and his re-imagination of Batman.

It is the breadth of Miller’s influences at this time that enables us to grasp what is at stake here. The way his oeuvre developed in the early to mid 1980s goes some way to showing how, as the decade progressed, the British influence became more entrenched. Moreover, that influence was only ever one amongst many in the work of Miller, and arguably it was only in collaboration with Dave Gibbons on *Give Me Liberty* that the same approach to political content in an SF setting as was found in British work was fully realised. Miller, like many US creators, adapted parts of what the British group were doing in their comics in his own, but without the adult mainstream sub-genre ever becoming a rigid reflection of *2000AD*. Instead what can be seen in Miller’s *TDKR* is a process of

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assimilation and re-interpretation of the approach and the politics of British creators in his comics.

Ronin: Stuck in Synthesis

After his initial run on *DareDevil*, Miller left Marvel in 1982 for DC to work on a new prestige format title of his own devising: *Ronin*.³⁰⁶ This title established Miller's reputation for experimenting with new forms and influences from outside the American mainstream. Groth and Fiore identify his attempt to incorporate 'the strong, yet not fully digested influence of the French cartoonist Moebius (Jean Girard) and the Japanese cartoonist Goseki Kojima.'³⁰⁷ Furthermore, Miller was clearly starting to move towards a more radical kind of political content in his work, the dystopic New York at the heart of the text bringing to bear a critique of his immediate environs at the time. *Ronin* showed a growing awareness of how to change the dynamic in the relationship between central characters and an idealised reader through the strong, black female character of Casey McKenna who helps us to negotiate the (ostensibly time travelling) medieval Japanese warrior Ronin's difference. Gone are the thought balloons and caption boxes that were dominant within American comics at the time to be replaced by a narrative carried purely through the art, breakdown and dialogue.

The story in *Ronin* follows the establishment of Aquarius, a bio-circuitry development lab, in the heart of a post-apocalyptic Manhattan. The narrative is split between the adventures of the Ronin in his quest to slay the evil demon Agat and the challenges faced by Casey McKenna as Aquarius's head of security. What seems to be a magical intervention on the part of Agat turns out to be an elaborate ploy by Virgo, the

³⁰⁶ Groth and Fiore op cit p.59

³⁰⁷ Ibid p.59

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sentient computer at the heart of the bio-circuitry revolution, to manipulate the psychic Billy into helping “her” take over the world.

The problem with the comic is that it attempts to weave a complex narrative while remaining very close to its influences. This act of synthesising both the Japanese and French comic traditions, as Groth and Fiore point out, is transparent to the extent that it stops the narrative as a whole cohering. The half of the comic focused on the character of the Ronin draws heavily on the work of Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima’s *Lone Wolf and Cub* and the other half stylistically imitates the work Jean Giraud (aka Moebius).³⁰⁸ Where the two approaches meet – primarily in the milieu of a disintegrating Manhattan – the light touch of Giraud is difficult to reconcile with the serious, epic tone of Koike and Kojima.

One of the more successful examples of the synthesis can be seen in figure 28 in which *Ronin* attempts to tackle race in a satirical manner and demonstrates what could be seen as a “pre-British” approach to radicalism. This fictional Manhattan is dominated by two gangs vying over turf, the Panthers (a male gang with an anti-white “civil rights” rhetoric run by “the momma” Silk) and the Nazis (an Amazonian neo-Nazi gang run by its “fuhrer” Jagger). Both sides feed dissenters to troglodytic cannibals who live deep in the sewers under New York. These pages show the Ronin and his peacenik manager Head interrupting two gang members as they leave victims out for the underground horde.

What is immediately obvious is, like in *Daredevil*, the horizontal layouts characteristic of manga. While more commonly used for scene setting or action sequences in the work of Kojima, here Miller uses them and other manga inspired layouts, as default

³⁰⁸ Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima *Lone Wolf and Cub: Volume 1, The Assassin’s Road* trans. Lewis, Dana (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Manga, 2000)

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for most sections focused on the Ronin as a way of signifying the difference between the fantasy mode of the Japanese influence with the science fiction mode of the French. Nevertheless, they become an effective way of presenting the dialogue which dominates the expository content of the comic.

As we can see in the top panel, the horizontal layout makes space for two talking heads in close up. The use of a single column of five horizontal panels also enables a quick shift in pace from plot development to more action orientated segments of the story. Here, however, it manages to deliver a joke - ‘nuts, there goes the neighbourhood’ (p17) – while using the panel layout to emphasise the characters’ responses to the racist discourse. We can see this in the third and fourth panels of page 16: the nonchalance of the Ronin in the third as he looks directly at the reader and the fear in the eyes of the black sacrifice to the troglodytes in the fourth panel as he does the same. This is then reasserted in the final panel of page 17 where the close up is on the black victim’s face again. The message seems to be crudely similar to that of *RoboHunter* looked at in chapter 4: any sort of racial prejudice has its invariant final outcome in death, and that ultimately the content of the racist discourse is immaterial when compared to its outcomes.

This message is structured through the layout. The joke itself takes place within the four vertical panels (that replace two of the horizontal) on page 17 reinforcing the shift in tone. The dark humour of the whole extract is held together very well through this combination of obvious visual archetypes, direct reader address and panel layout; however its critique of racist prejudice is far simpler than that of the *2000AD* story. The Ronin’s ability to delineate himself as a ‘nip’ as opposed to a ‘chink’ in his first attempt to speak English reinforces the idea that to become acculturated in this future New York is to be

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identified in ethnic terms. The multiculturalism of the middle-class enclave of Aquarius stands in stark contrast to the fractured and racialised society of the Manhattan street. The difference between this and its rough contemporary ‘Play It Again Sam’ is that in the *2000AD* example the blurred boundaries of race and class enabled the comic to play upon the way in which existing class inequalities are effaced by racist discourse. Here all racialised discourses are figured as equivalent – blacks and whites hate each other and both hate “nips” – and that is at the core of the joke.

The parallels between of the Black Power movement and the Nazis belies a very different sort of politics than that found in *2000AD*, one that is in fact at the heart (or rather the belly perhaps) of this critique of New York. For one thing, unlike National Socialism, the black power movement embodied by the real life Black Panthers, channelled here, was a response to centuries of oppression against a specific minority group. While Wagner and Gibson offered us a conflation of historical issues of class and racial oppression to expose their connections, here history and class are evacuated to make a glib “they’re all as bad as each other” point about racism. But in sublimating class as an issue the critique fails further: in essence the character of both of these organisations is encapsulated in their willingness to sacrifice their own members to an even more threatening other – a literal underclass, the troglodytes. And who are these unseen demons? Casey informs us:

My dad, he used to tell me about the bums that used to live under Manhattan, before the crash. Guess the winos could’ve had kids... kids of winos... born down here... Christ they’d be like cave men... probably a bunch of congenital idiots.³⁰⁹

There are various different readings possible here, the reference to ‘winos’ in itself could be satirical, a comment on the neglected members of New York society, but the reading that

³⁰⁹Miller op cit 1983 # 4 p. 17

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imposes itself most readily in the context of the Panthers and the Nazis is of an oxymoronic class-blind, yet very middle class anxiety about the “unwashed poor”. This then feeds back into the overly simplistic opposition between the Nazis and the Panthers.

The interlude is clearly meant to express a frustration with the state of race relations in the USA, but it does so without demonstrating an awareness of wider contexts or a sensitivity to historical precedent in the way that *2000AD* did. It could be argued that this is a science fiction story and thus the politics should not necessarily reflect those things, but the references to historical groups suggest that it is supposed to be understood as a political critique. Social and political criticism is also arguably the mode that science fiction works best in and *Ronin* is definitely attempting some of this. Yet critically, the class difference between the inside equal-rights world of Aquarius and the outside racist-gender defined landscape of Manhattan is one that is never fully explored by the comic, despite being clearly obvious. Instead the stratification of society is emphasised by the difference in art style and narrative tropes between a wild-west Manhattan and a Machiavellian political drama among the Aquarians. These differences are never fully reconciled – the outside being largely the location where the insiders are tested before being able to resolve their high-court conflicts and principled moral dilemmas, rather than the New York street being a location that has value in and of itself.

What this demonstrates is that while elements of a shift in the politics are in place (a black, female central character for instance), *Ronin* still takes its politics very much from a political centre and for a specific (white, male, middle-class) audience.³¹⁰ What political

³¹⁰ To be fair to Miller, unlike Storm in the *X-Men*, Casey McKenna’s sexuality and sexual desires are very much central to the plot.

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commentary there may be is couched within a framework of class anxiety about urban decay and a conservatism that while critical of big business (and particularly the military-industrial complex as manifested in the Aquarius complex), remains rooted in middle class anxieties around crime and social upheaval that Miller himself, as we shall see, would savage in *TDKR*.

Nevertheless, there is a shift in *Ronin* around the use of form that was radical for its time and location within the marketplace for direct sales. While his direct influences largely eschew caption boxes and thought balloons, they rely on other techniques to communicate and engage their readers. For instance, *LWaC* primarily uses the slow paced ‘aspect to aspect’ transitions that McCloud identifies as characteristic of manga.³¹¹ *Ronin* does little of the first and none of the second, relying mainly on dialogue and “splash” pages to communicate its context. Moreover, in the same way as in other comics looked at so far and as demonstrated in the example above, the comic frequently addresses the reader by having characters look directly through the page to return the readers gaze. While dialogue and direct address of the reader are effective at shaping a different politics in the relationship between reader and text to an extent, the comic as a whole is more concerned with synthesising its influences rather than delivering a sophisticated political narrative.

Thus, while clearly representing a difference to what has gone before it, *Ronin* can only partially be seen as part of the movement that changed the boundaries of American mainstream comics. For one thing, it was a commercial failure.³¹² It is undoubtedly aimed

³¹¹ McCloud op cit 1993 p. 72

³¹² There is some conflict over *Ronin*’s success, Wolk describes it as making a ‘splash’ (op cit p.174), while Groth and Fiore describe the public response as ‘disappointing’ despite the fact it had ‘garnered enthusiastic praise from fellow professionals’. (op cit p. 59). My sense from these positions is that it was

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primarily at adults, but like other examples such as *Camelot 3000* it lacks the richness that later works have in what would become the adult mainstream.³¹³ Beyond its limited response to class issues, what seems quite clearly lacking as compared to Miller's later work is a psychological depth and contextual richness. In some respects *Ronin* represents (along with Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg* and Mike Baron and Steve Rude's *Nexus*) what mainstream American adventure comics might have looked like *without* the influence of the British group of creators – more adult than before in terms of themes of sex, graphic violence and a criticism of the status quo, yet without the means to negotiate not just a different way of addressing readers but also of challenging the political positions available in mainstream popular culture.³¹⁴ *Ronin*'s strength is in its bombastic art and fusion of French and Japanese comics styles, not in its sophisticated presentation of a new political sensibility. While attempting something similar to the *2000AD* approach, it is difficult to say from the text itself whether the British group of creators had made an impact on Miller's work at this point. We can be far surer of that when looking at *TDKR*.

probably critically well received, but failed to connect to a wider audience. This tends to support the general gist of the argument here.

³¹³ Mike W. Barr (w), Brian Bolland (a) *Camelot 3000* (New York: DC Comics, 2008)

³¹⁴ Mike Baron (w), Steve Rude (a) *Nexus Archives* Vol. 1 (Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2005); Howard Chaykin, *American Flagg!* Volumes 1-2 (Berkeley, London: Titan Books, 2008)

Analysing the Dark Knight Returns

The Dark Knight Returns was released in 1986 and was Miller's first major work after

Ronin having massively reducing his output over the two year period following

disappointment over *Ronin*'s lack of commercial success.³¹⁵ *TDKR* was released as four

"prestige format" comics each double the length of an ordinary American comic book and

collected in one edition shortly afterwards. This edition was the first "A-List" superhero

graphic novel to have mass distribution in bookshops across the USA and UK. It is widely

considered to have been a watershed in the public view of mainstream superheroes and to

have shifted the demographic for reading these sorts of comics.

As stated before there have been many different critical approaches to *TDKR*, but

perhaps the most useful to look at as a lead in to my analysis is that of Geoff Klock.³¹⁶

Klock is also concerned with the influence of different comics creators on each other, but in

a very different way. For him Miller's Batman is an originary text for a new movement in

superhero comics and in a sense what it does is secondary to what it enabled going forward

and the previous superhero narratives it draws upon to bring about a new tradition in

superhero comics. Klock locates Batman's successes within the superhero genre rather than

in its commentary on social and political changes, but he produces his narrative, in the

same way that I do, through close reading, albeit with different analytical priorities. Both of

us are concerned with influence, but again in very different ways and both can be

³¹⁵ He spent his time 'woodshedding' according to Groth and Fiore op cit p. 59

³¹⁶ Klock op cit particularly pp. 26-52

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complemented by the more circumspect overview of the Batman character offered by Will Brooker.³¹⁷

As Klock puts it, para-phrasing Bloom, ‘Few superhero narratives enjoy uncomplicated relationships with prior parent-narratives, which are (all too) regularly present in the narrative.’³¹⁸ I am in broad agreement with this statement and *TDKR* is a good example to illustrate the point, but between Brooker and Klock a sound understanding of *TDKR* emerges within the context of Batman’s wider comic book history and it would be mere repetition to cover the same ground here. Suffice to say that my focus is different, looking instead at the immediate context of the impact of British comics on its political content, the manner in which it constructs a relationship with its readers and the wider social milieu.

Klock’s work is a highly useful corollary to my own; he identifies and explores issues in more detail than I have space to do here such as the comics relationship to Reagan, the way it answered questions around the accusations from Fredric Wertham that Batman and Robin were romantically involved, and the manner in which Miller shifts that homoerotic sub-text to the relationship between Batman and the Joker.³¹⁹ Nevertheless, implicit within his framing assertion (above) is a theoretical position to which I do not subscribe. This is his use of “parent-narratives” to imply a readily available psycho-analytic approach to superheroes. Like psycho-analysis takes place within the closed spaces of the

³¹⁷ See Brooker op cit

³¹⁸ Klock op cit p. 2

³¹⁹ See Klock op cit pp. 36-38 The relationship between Batman and Robin and the Robins change in *TDKR* from being male to female is often a focus for academic interest in the comic: see for example Nathan G. Tipton ‘Gender Trouble: Frank Miller’s Revision of Robin in the *Batman: Dark Knight Series*’ *Journal of Popular Culture* Volume 41 Issue 2 (Chichester: Wiley, 2008)

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mind and the equally closed narratives of the Freudian interpretations of mythologised drives, so Klock's view of the superhero genre is one that can be hermetically removed from wider social concerns. As Klock puts it: 'any given superhero narrative stands in relation to its conflicted, chaotic tradition, and continuity as the ego stands in relation to the unconscious.'³²⁰ I am not debating the importance of genre traditions and movements, but the comics of Miller and Moore in the 1980s that Klock identifies as so key cannot be seen as simply the result of a conversation within comics. They are as much about a new conversation between comics and the outside world, and how this is connoted in the texts themselves. Klock in rejecting the cultural studies approach along with a range of theoretical approaches to connect culture with wider society dismisses the possibility of exploring what is happening in the comic to explain not just its significance within comics fandom, but its longevity and popularity outside the narrow perspective of a genre-based fan culture.³²¹

The point I am making here can be distilled in the difference between Geoff Klock's and my own approach to Miller and Moore. While Klock places the two men as genius authors and their comics as an extension of that genius produced through a discourse with previous comics texts; this study places them as participants in a set of political and cultural movements occurring at the time both within the field of comics and outside it. Moreover here I would argue that the two creators (and their collaborators) were pioneers of a set of techniques and themes that enabled comics to express their connection to a changing society and empower people through their response to it. Klock instead suggests that not

³²⁰ Klock op cit p. 5

³²¹ Ibid p. 11

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only are socio-political factors largely irrelevant, but even that the industry and fans themselves are: ‘highly accidental extra-textual materials organised by a visionary storyteller.’³²²

There is an element here of emphasising the differences between two projects (my own and Klock’s) with similar subject matter and methods, but different priorities in their execution. Nevertheless, when looking at *TDKR* there are key moments in the comic that clearly either use specific techniques or are direct references to the body of *2000AD* inspired work that Miller was now adding to his extensive list of influences, something that cannot be addressed within the framework of Klock’s analysis. Despite this, Klock’s reading of the comic cannot avoid what he calls the comic’s ‘intense levels of realism’, which despite its literary framing and his declared objectives, is a recognition of the centrality of wider political and social issues in the comic. This brings him back into the realm of the kinds of readings he ostensibly rejects.³²³

Though deft in his use of psycho-analytic theory, particularly around Batman’s relationship to his nemeses, the framework of Freudian inspired literary theory seems to be awkward for this particular comic as, despite its interest in the *psychology* of the characters, those very *psycho-analytic* narratives are consistently under heavy satirical fire throughout the book (in particular through the character of Doctor Wolper – a parody of *Seduction of the Innocents* Fredric Wertham). Klock embraces a literal reading of these aspects of the comic, which I think misplaces some of Miller’s satire. Yet in doing so, he feeds the readings into the complex negotiation of homosexuality in the comic; an important area and

³²² Ibid p. 14

³²³ Klock op cit p. 29

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related to the general argument of my thesis, but as it has been dealt with so extensively by Klock and others that any additional analysis from me would be mostly gloss. Thus any criticism I have of his method and priorities is met with a gratitude that his work frees the rest of this chapter to address the specificities of the construction of class in the comic, which otherwise could appear a partial reading of a rich and complex text.

Crime and Gangs

Building on the themes from *Ronin* of urban decay and global destruction, each half of *TDKR* focuses on different political issues. The first half of *TDKR* is a response to the 1980s crime wave in New York, while the second half, as in *V*, dramatises the effects of a limited nuclear war. In some ways Miller uses one to resolve the other, which we will look at in the analysis of figures 32 and 33, but in general he tackles directly something that simply helped to provide background context in *Ronin*. Batman directly intervenes in both the crime wave and the fallout from the Russian nuclear attack and his response to each structures the narrative, but what gives the comic its strength is in the satirising of the media as a means of “mediating” the readers’ response to the events in what McCue and Bloom term : ‘a post-modern, barbaric, cityscape’.³²⁴

This media also reinforces the connections with the wider world, it broaches the emotional narrative spaces that Batman occupies and links them into the wider socio-political discourses. What makes the “media presence” so critical to the mode of reader engagement in the comic is just how weak a commentary on events it offers. We can see this early on in pages 13 and 14 (figures 29 and 30) which between them demonstrate not just how the comic addresses its core themes, but also the range of techniques Miller uses to engage the reader with the narrative, its setting and its characters. Yet to understand the role of the media, we must also understand the position of the gangs that between Batman and the TV studios comprise the triangle of reader engagement that enables the comic to function. Throughout the comic the three perspectives are held in balance to construct a

³²⁴ McCue and Bloom op cit p. 70

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narrative space from which the reader is given space to think through the moral and political questions that the comic poses.

Page 13 shows the middle-aged, moustachioed Bruce Wayne walking home from a nostalgic drink with Commissioner Gordon, his one time ally in the fight against crime. Miller returns Wayne to the spot of his parents' murder (the event that motivated him to become Batman) and has him confronted by two members of the 'Mutants' a gang of violent criminals. These youths are a direct reference to that other "subversive" gang of young misfits, the X-Men. The connection is further emphasised by the imitation of the mono-shades sported by X-Men's captain Cyclops. In essence the narrow conservatism of the comics code bound band of super-teens is as much a target as their real life contemporaries on the street.

Rather than the dialogue that provided all the background in *Ronin*, here we are given an insight into Wayne's mind: a staccato internal monologue playing through his thoughts on his inadvertent return to the scene of Batman's originary crime (failing to save his parents) and the effect that it has on a bored and frustrated former superhero. Brooker sees this as a radical shift in the way character was communicated within the Batman canon:

comics writers can shape their own interpretation of the Batman through a narrational 'voiceover', or an 'internal monologue'. The first device was dominant in Batman stories, from my reading, from the late 1930s until the mid-1980s. You will remember the opening caption of the first Batman story, describing 'a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness', and the way this portentous tone was echoed in the 1943 serial's narration, then parodied in Dozier's TV voiceover in 1966. The same device was still being used in 1980... Clearly, these expository captions give us a sense of the author's vision of Batman through an added description of character, action movement, and the opportunity for metaphorical overtones.

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Brooker continues:

More common in contemporary comics, however, particularly those which style themselves for an older audience, is the ‘internal monologue’ caption, which gives us entry into Batman’s mind moment-by-moment or permits us to read his journal entries. Given the pulpy, faintly comical rhetoric of the ‘expository’ caption, it is unsurprising that this device should be valued for its more serious, literary overtones; it is also, of course, bringing us closer to the character by making us privy to his own private thought patterns.³²⁵

Brooker is commenting from within the history of Batman as a character and thus uses it to mark the difference between Miller and Moore’s vision of the character (p. 268). In fact, when looking at the technique within the broader field of comics production it is Miller adopting techniques made popular by Moore on *Swamp Thing* and slightly less directly *V for Vendetta*. What is important to note is that Brooker is comparing visual resemblance between expository boxes and monologue boxes rather than comparing on the basis of narrative purpose. The “internal monologue” of Batman here is not simply replacing expository captions, but equally the thought balloon. Miller’s use of the inner thoughts of his characters as opposed to the pure dialogue option that we saw in *Ronin* suggests not only a dissatisfaction with the limits that dialogue operates under, but equally a clear indication of the sorts of shifts that Moore’s work was starting to bring to the US. The adoption of techniques like this from Moore goes further in advancing the suggestion of Miller as a great synthesiser. The use of TV screens which have a narrative purpose similar to expository captions (incidentally, TV screens were also used, in a less accomplished but similar way, by Moore, Totleben and Bissette in later issues of *Swamp Thing* in 1985) that make Miller’s work far stronger than that of, say, Howard Chaykin in *American Flagg*

³²⁵ Brooker op cit pp. 266-267

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(which has some similar themes, but still relies largely on thought balloons to develop character).³²⁶

The change in breakdown model indicates another level of innovation. The sixteen panel page – that Brooker describes as a ‘filmic grid’ - remains the loose template for most of the comic and is used here in a specific way to draw us into the fifty year-old’s reverie and emphasise key moments in the encounter.³²⁷ The four panels in the first strip move through essentially manga- style moment-to-moment transitions as Wayne wanders aimlessly through Gotham and they serve to portray him as a well groomed, if slightly pensive middle-aged man. The page then breaks to the long vertical panel on the left hand side emphasising the significance of the alleyway with the accompanying monologue following the move to become a vertical column of text to the left of the panel, instead of sitting above as in the top strip. This panel also serves to compact and thus intensify the action to the right, comprising the five panels where the confrontation between the young Mutants and the retired Batman takes place. As Jim Collins describes the general operation of panel distribution in *The Dark Knight Returns*:

The end result is a narration that proceeds syntagmatically across and down the page or adjacent pages, so that the tableaux moves the plot forward but encourages the eye to move in continually shifting trajectories as it tries to make sense of the overall pattern of fragmentary images.³²⁸

This process focuses attention on the five smaller panels that are of primary interest here.

The move from deep thought to shocked awareness in the first to second panels (of the five)

³²⁶ See Alan Moore (w), Stephen Bissette (a), John Totleben (a) *Swamp Thing Vol 3: The Curse* (New York: Vertigo DC, 2000) 'The Nukeface Papers' pp. 5-50

³²⁷ Brooker op cit p. 271

³²⁸ Jim Collins 'Batman: The Movie, Narrative: The Hyperconscious' in Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (eds.) *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical approaches to superhero and his media* (New York, London: Routledge and BFI, 1991) pp 164-181, p. 173

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occurs as Wayne holds the readers gaze. Looking at the reader in this second panel, we have an “Animal Man moment” (see chapter 3) as Wayne thinks ‘Right over there’, while the as yet unseen assailants respond ‘he sees us’. As the mutants move into view Wayne’s internal monologue fragments and in the grey shaded box we start to hear the Batman persona emerge out of the retired Wayne’s voice: the shading contrasting with the unbounded text-boxes of the monologue to this point.³²⁹

Batman/Wayne retains eye contact throughout these panels. His thoughts sway between, on the one hand, equating all the criminals in Gotham with the specific one who murdered his parents and, on the other hand, recognising the social forces behind the crimes. As readers we move from being implicated through the mutants to being bounced out of identification with them at Wayne’s arousal by the prospect of violence, only to be re-engaged on the next page as a TV audience with two news presenters staring us directly in the eye. Miller asserts that this sequence represents Wayne attempting suicide at the hands of the sorts of criminals he spent a lifetime fighting.³³⁰ Yet, this snapshot into the mind of Batman seems to suggest not suicide, but repressed enthusiasm for a coming fight and its ambiguity lies with the reader, as it is the reader who is directly being addressed through Wayne’s gaze.

The response of the mutants to this strange character that seems to enjoy violence is telling: ‘Slice and dice, we got a quota...’ they say. The business-speak which invades the Mutants’ slang reveals that far from desperate criminals or psychopaths, this crime wave in

³²⁹ The shading of different characters thoughts in different colours is a technique also used in Moore, Bissette and Totleben’s *Swamp Thing* and used throughout this comic to distinguish between different characters thoughts.

³³⁰ Christopher Sharrett ‘Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller’ in Pearson and Uricchio op cit p. 39

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Gotham/New York is thoroughly “corporatized”. Murder has been banalised to the extent it has become a job with performance targets. This is organised crime, not in the sense of the Mafia, but more like a muggers union with street violence and robbery normalised to the extent that it becomes a form of mundane work. It is crime made routine.

TDKR’s contemporary readers would quite possibly have direct experience of crime in their society and it is not impossible that some would be contributing to it as much as victims of it. We as readers are factored into complicity with the criminals rather than the crime fighter. The technique used in other comics discussed in the thesis to draw the reader into the character, here serves to place us in the uncanny location of both hearing Wayne’s thoughts and placed as the costumed youths attempting to murder him. Batman is addressing us – but instead of identifying with him, we are invited to identify with the mutants in the manner of a Greek chorus. Greenblatt agrees following her theoretical exploration of the ‘Child’ as a location for identification:

[As with *Carrie*] even the Mutants are framed in this way – as murderous, psychopathic children, but only for lack of good governmental/paternal influence. While part of the Child’s ability to mobilize an audience and/or political/social change relies on its ability to function as a blank slate, an identificatory ideal, this blankness can only exist in the context of threat.³³¹

For the Mutants this threat is of social breakdown and they feature as both victims and violent manifestation of moral collapse. As with the street punks that inhabit the dystopian Mega-City-One of Judge Dredd (a connection that is made more explicit later on in the comic), the process of engagement with the text is factored through the wider urban environment and its inhabitants rather than the central character. Batman/Wayne then

³³¹ Greenblatt op cit para. 7

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becomes a driving object viewing and judging us, but with a very different set of motivations to the Judge of Mega City One. Yet as in Mega City One, Gotham is supposed to have resonance with its readership as a recognisable re-imagination of contemporary New York.

Miller factors several things into this construction of the gangs: firstly they are clearly defined visually as not just a crime wave, but also as a fashion movement through their cyber-punk style outfits and Cyclops's eyewear; secondly, they are a product of social decay and poverty. The top strip on page 14 (figure 30) makes this second point clear and it is also noted as a key difference in Miller's approach to Batman by Uriccho and Pearson, who argue that in previous stories featuring the Batman:

[the] representation of Gotham certainly gives a compelling image of late twentieth-century decay, as any New Yorker can attest, and the astute reader will certainly see these conditions as a causal factor in the high Gotham crime rate. Yet, like the criminals, Gotham is largely removed from a socio-economic context. The narratives deal with the crime rate, but not the unemployment rate... in short they deal with the transgressions of the underclasses but not the conditions that give rise to those transgressions.³³²

Conversely, Batman had often been figured as a benevolent icon for an American industrialist aristocracy: Wayne manor and industries an immense resource for a man who looked out for others, as he was simply better than them. Uriccho and Pearson suggest the class dynamics change in Miller's figuring of the character: '[In *TDKR*, Batman's] outlaw position caused him to re-appraise his analysis of the social order and ultimately ally with elements of the underclass he sought to contain.'³³³ They are referring to the end sequence when Batman rallies the former Mutants to his cause, but even at the start of the book we

³³² William Urricho and Roberta Pearson "'I'm not fooled by that cheap disguise" in Uriccho and Pearson (eds) op cit p. 206

³³³ Ibid p. 209

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can see Wayne's understanding of the motivations for crime, talking of his parents murderer: 'All he wanted was money.'

Wayne's straightforward reading of crime in the context is an improvement on the simple "evil criminals" discourse of many superhero comics, but it is still reductive: what *TDKR*'s Gotham presents us with is a culture of crime. While poverty is a motivating factor, street crime seems to be what young people simply do and do in an organised, systematised manner. In this tortured moment, Wayne has an inkling of what this may mean: 'These are [his parent's murderer's] children. A purer breed... and this world is theirs'.

At the heart of the city's crime wave is a complete absence of moral purpose, one that Batman will restore towards the end of the book, but the vacuum is epitomised in his portrayal of Reagan who reduces everything in politics to the running of a ranch – it becomes a managerial question rather than a moral one (p. 84). The comics Reaganism stands for a showbiz sensibility to a technocratic politics and the ramifications of this approach to governance extend down to the very streets of Gotham city. What this milieu represents is an abandonment of political and social values and responsibility in favour of managerialism, celebrity and the appearance of ethics rather than actions based upon them. Although Miller in some respects is equating youth subculture with violent behaviour (and he would not be the first to do so), he is also pointing to a political deficit in public life. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the vacuous soundbites of the comic's media.

The comic attempts to come to terms with the impact on social values of the shallow narratives needed to structure a rolling news culture. On page 14 the middle strip is

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comprised of four TV panels in which a presenter and a weatherman discuss the source of the crime wave. The group murder of a family for the meagre sum of twelve dollars is explained as motivated by money for drugs. Yet even as the easy assumption that drugs and poverty are driving crime is at least a vague recognition of its causes, it is equally a way of standardising and compartmentalising the crime into an accepted framework: e.g. it is only poor people that commit crimes, particularly those poor people who are on drugs as drugs make you do bad things. There is no evidence for this, it is the media's default position and as we have seen the page before these young people seem not to be motivated by drugs, but by quotas.

Moreover, rather than acknowledge the gravity of the crime and conduct some real investigation of its causes, the journalists are instead motivated by connecting it to their other main story – the weather. Pramod Nayar suggests that this is a device by Miller to create an environmental connection to the return of Batman and the weather in Gotham:

What Miller does here is to clearly link weather and atmosphere to the crime rate, the deteriorating city and the return of the Dark Knight. The Dark Knight represents a change of weather. Miller brilliantly builds up the tension in the atmosphere (both literal and metaphoric) – the blazing weather, the high crime rate, the imminent change in the weather, the cooling, the calm and then the storm. When the Dark Knight returns to Gotham, everything in the climate changes and a new climate of fear is launched, but this time for the criminals of the city.³³⁴

Nayar's argument that ecological concerns are a constant sub-theme in *TDKR* is valid if one accepts his point that the city itself seems to operate as an ecosystem, with the Batman himself seemingly top of the food chain. It also suggests that there is a level of influence

³³⁴ Pramod Nayar 'Popular Culture and the Ecological Gothic: Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*' *Nebula* 6.1, March 2009 pp. 42-43 Available at http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/Nebula/2009/No2/Nayar_p.pdf

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from *Swamp Thing*.³³⁵ Accepting Nayar's point, the media are right; the crime wave and the heat wave are, in a metaphoric logic, one and the same. Nevertheless Miller manages to combine this metaphor through the media, while at the same time using it to critique the institution. In keeping with the social commentary aspect of the Mutants, there is no material connection between the heat wave and the crime: it simply fits the media's flow from segment to segment in providing a neat way to link from the news anchor to the weatherman. The priority of good TV is put ahead of factual reporting. The final panel, a TV screen, serves to reinforce the inappropriateness of this focus on the news cycle as interpretative framework by reporting 'this just in – a dead cat has been found stapled to the door of the first church of Christ the redeemer'.

This panel sits at the bottom of a half page spread that visualises the heatwave as a hazy mist over Gotham city. It reveals the inadequacy of the news reports hypothesising over the nature of the crime wave. With no obvious material gain for the perpetrators of the cat crime, the news reporter looks straight at us in abject horror – the news narrative broken. The newscasters simply cannot account for the murder of a cat. If they cannot produce a position where selfish material gain is the only explanation for all activities then they flounder. This is reflective of a neoliberal middle class ideology, something which will align the media with the rioters in the final analysis of this chapter: a connection made explicit by the character of the journalist in that section. The Mutants on the other hand have no such confusion; they are engaged not just in crime, but in a war of signs. The

³³⁵ Nayar also points to Superman's thoughts after the detonation of the nuclear bomb on pp. 176-177 suggesting that this is a key part of the environmental narrative. My sense is that it would not have been out of place for Moore's *Swamp Thing* to share exactly the same sentiments.

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choice of church suggests that there is no redemption for these impressionable technocratic terrorists with their quotas and their hierarchy, nothing to hold onto but crime itself.

Nayar suggests that the Mutants clearly are victims of a sort of repression however, linking back to the troglodytic sewer people in *Ronin*:

Miller draws a clear analogy between the caverns of the city, the caverns of Wayne/Batman's mind and the caverns of the collective repressed. The mutants occupy the non-spaces of the city, the metaphorical sewers, here identified as the town 'dump': 'The dump stretches out of sight from the far bank of the West river ... it smells of rot and rust – it's a breeding ground for insects and rodents'.³³⁶

In the context of the connection to *Ronin*, the Mutants seem to represent what happens when an underclass revolts completing the class structure in the comics: an upper class Batman struggling against (at least initially) a violent, rebelling underclass, while the middle class watch on TV with a marriage of shock and amusement that can only come from the satisfaction of their own "moral superiority".

Thus we have the three key structuring elements in place in these two pages: Batman/Wayne who struggles against his own masochistic desires for violence as a constant reliving of his parents murder; the mutants who operate in a kind of semiotic violence hybridising the New York crime wave with Marvel's X-Men with a commentary on poverty in a social and political moral vacuum; and finally the media who then reduce all that complexity to 30 second sound-bites within a wider news narrative designed to satisfy a hypocritical body politic who appear in frequent vox-pops to sound their views.

³³⁶ Nayar op cit p. 44

Everyday Victims: Class, Celebrity and Superheroes

Page 65 (figure 31) adds further sophistication to Miller's engagement with issues of class and the media. In this brief interlude, we see a middle-aged mother going home to her two sons on the subway. It is a stand-alone composition using the page as a unit and its explicit purpose is to highlight the behaviour of the Mutant gang and the consequences for their victims. The page is structured in close adherence to the sixteen panel layout that Miller makes standard for the comics as a whole. Unusually for a bit-part character we get a direct insight into the woman's mind in the form of a kind of internal monologue, normally reserved for main characters.

The use of this technique here and its independence from the main narrative, gives it a reflective resonance for the comic as a whole. Like Wayne's inner thoughts before his Batman persona returned in the previous example, here the interior monologue text sits in mostly unbounded boxes above the panels. There is a key difference however; the few interludes such as this are the only places where an explicit third person narrator intervenes to establish the character. Margaret Corcoran is introduced by this voice and her thoughts are thus placed into the third person. This deviation from the conventions used in the comic again emphasises the page as an important juncture in the narrative as a whole.

The significant thing about Margaret is that she is an ordinary working class woman – who is subject to neither satire nor mockery – but is in the wrong place at the wrong time and thus spectacularly murdered by two Mutants. She is presented as faded, tired and hunched as the top half of the page takes us through her thoughts and emotions. Her low income status is indicated by the fact that she is beset by her job as a waitress and a series of financial worries: she cannot afford treatment for her varicose veins or to pay the

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electricity bill and when given a tip by ‘an uptown drunk’ she must make the choice between a gift for her artistic son or painkillers for herself. The outcome of this choice is the two panels immediately before she is accosted by the Mutants, where we see that despite all her difficulties the simple thing of a present for her son keeps her going and we see a beauty start to transcend her exhausted form. Miller is directly acknowledging the impact of poverty on people’s lives and unlike in *Ronin* this is done with gravity here despite the elaborate murder.

The page then not only starts to make clear the comic’s position on class, but equally goes some way to explain the behaviour of the Mutants through their relationship with the media. When Corcoran is blown up by a hand grenade placed in her handbag, the Mutants stare gleefully out of the subway carriage window waiting to see the show. This is followed by a news bulletin in the final panel ‘Woman explodes in subway station – film at eleven.’ This is ultimately the justification for the Mutants’ behaviour. The role they hold in the comic, as dangerous youth, a ‘collective repressed’ (Nayar) and as the implied readership is held together only through their relationship with the omnipresent TV screens. When Batman defeats their leader, a group of Mutants break off to become ‘the Sons of the Batman’: their 20 second manifesto played on repeat on television (indicated by its duplication on pages 113 and 161). In the absence of a wider sense of social purpose, the young working class obsessed by television simply want to appear on it, and the easiest way is by gruesome stunts such as nailing cats to churches or by blowing up single mothers on subway platforms.

The Mutant’s obsession with TV and media culture that starts with film-star president Reagan (‘And the president knows showbiz’ p. 66) and ends in Margaret

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Corcoran being blown up by boys that could easily have been her sons. The media feeds this by reporting to a logic that equates sensationalism with ratings, so fuelling the very social issues they purport to decry. The Mutants of course are not simply looking to find a sense of self worth through TV mentions and appearances; they are also avid consumers of the medium. We see this when the Mutant gang are locked up in prison and an electromagnetic pulse induced by a nuclear bomb in the atmosphere knocks out all electricity. Their instinctive response is not to escape, but to get the TV working again (p. 167). Indeed the suggestion seems to be that the prison was barely containing them anyway; they were simply pacified by the flickering images on the screen (p. 163).

One of the ways we can understand this in the context of a Batman comic is through the lens of the superhero as celebrity. In the world of *TDKR*, Batman and the activities of his counterpoising supervillains take the place of the real life media parade of pop and film stars. They occupy this central place in a culture that outside the comic was becoming in thrall to the music video and Hollywood blockbuster. As much as the “greed is good” ethos inculcated by Reaganite economic policy becoming the structuring principle of decency in economic life meant that to fail to be wealthy was equivalent to a moral fault, likewise to fail to be famous was a personal flaw. To the Mutants being the beneficiaries of a “trickle-down effect” would be akin to standing underneath rich people’s guttering. Thus, the logic of doing anything to appear on TV, where all the trappings of ostentatious wealth are keenly on show, is firmly within the aspirational logic of the time. Jo Littler explains the outcome of this marriage of celebrity and neo-liberalism in contemporary terms:

Whether at the extreme (e.g. Barry George, obsessed since his poverty ridden childhood with ways of achieving fame, and trying to find it by killing TV presenter Jill Dando) or ‘normal’ (e.g. feeling not quite as ‘successful’ as a celebrity but not

minding) end of the spectrum, these strategies of cultural coping or noncoping indicate a society and a culture that has developed some extraordinarily unequal ways to validate people's sense of self and collective worth...

If celebrity culture can be understood in terms of symbolic disempowerment, it also needs to be understood in the context of economic and social disempowerment: in terms of unequal access to material resources and social mobility.³³⁷

Miller's dystopic America anticipates the move towards a celebrity culture that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that Littler describes. In some ways Batman's political journey throughout the book is a growing awareness of his role as part of this cultural failing. Not only are there a steady stream of disastrous imitators, seeking to bask in the reflected glory of his iconic status (see particularly pp. 88-89) above and beyond the former Mutant gang 'Sons of the Batman', but there is a growing recognition that Batman produces the problems he encounter. As Klock puts it, with reference to extensive examples throughout the book, every villain 'operates as a kind of reflection of some aspect of Batman's personality or role'.³³⁸ Yet this perspective misses the dynamic role that the Mutants and the media play in this relationship between superhero, villain and politics.

Klock falls roughly in line with Miller's own reading when he draws conclusions from this process, although significantly missing out the media in the equation:

The collapse between antagonists, however, only points to a larger, more dangerous, pattern of collapse between Batman and his more shadowy reflective antagonist: the political. *The Dark Knight Returns* is also known for overtly engaging in political issues, but this misses the point that Miller makes in bringing political realities to Batman: comic books have always had a political dimension, usually supporting whatever hegemonic discourse (most often conservative) the decade had to offer... Miller wants to foreground a submerged aspect of comic book tradition. He chooses

³³⁷ Jo Littler 'Making Fame Ordinary: Intimacy, reflexivity and "keeping it real"' *Mediactive* #2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004) available at:

<http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/mediactive/archive/Mediactive2.pdf> p. 10

³³⁸ Klock op cit p. 35

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along with cold war Reagan-era politics, a more structural aspect of superhero politics: its fascistic tendencies.³³⁹

There is a strong point here, but the key is that in the context of the new direct market and the comics political position, Klock is playing down the most significant point about Batman's opposition to 'hegemonic discourse'. The sophisticated way 'the political' presents a critique of the dominant structure is not in-line with previous superhero comics (even going back to its very earliest days) and it is certainly different to the underground comix, the nearest movement within comics that took aim at the establishment. As Klock acknowledges, this is comics operating in a post Comics Code environment and is an exploration of that space, but it is not the origins of experimentation in political commentary in the 1980s.³⁴⁰ The introduction of a sophisticated class discourse that addresses the relationship between class and culture is the sort of social critique that had been established in the work of the *2000AD* group.

In his conflict with Superman towards the end of the book we see slightly more of what is at stake in the introduction of class to a radical critique of American culture. Batman is recognising the complicity of superheroism with the state in the figure of Superman who acts as Reagan's "secret weapon" against the Soviets. Fascism, as suggested earlier, is an awkward idea for what is being addressed or suggested: neither Superman, nor Batman, nor the political system is strictly speaking "fascist". Batman's vigilantism could be seen by some as fascistic, but he does not seek control over society, just wishes violence on those he identifies as criminal.

³³⁹ Ibid p. 39

³⁴⁰ Ibid p. 43

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If there is a critique of fascism here it would be effacing the difference between it and the free-market economy and celebrity/superhero orientated culture as expressed by the media. In such a scenario, the Reagan administration is complicit with it, a position that Klock emphasises 'both Batman and Reagan are fighting crime in a conspicuous display of power'.³⁴¹ Yet this parallel is significant, so long as Batman remains a part of this system of celebrity so will he be part of the apparatus of oppression. Again Klock's position here is useful but limited: 'Batman's position is that of both rebel and dispenser of a new hegemonic discourse' but he cannot identify what that discourse is.³⁴² If we look one last time at the role of the Mutants and the comics take on the, as yet unmentioned, middle class we can make this clear.

³⁴¹ Ibid p. 45

³⁴² Ibid p. 41

Nuclear War and the Middle Classes; or is Batman a Bolshevik?

In the final book of *TDKR* we finally get a close look at the one group not mentioned so far, the middle class. As the electromagnetic pulse from the Soviet ‘Coldbringer’ nuclear bomb knocks out all electricity in Gotham city, chaos ensues. Miller presents the aftermath from the perspective of Commissioner Gordon, Batman and a series of bystanders. Most notable among this last group are three men all of whom are clearly identified as middle-class. This section is his most damning indictment of the American class system and the “benevolent self-interest” of neo-liberal discourse, as it explicitly lays the blame for the looting and rioting on selfish, middle class, white men.

Before looking at some key pages in this section, it is worth tracing the sequence of events up to this moment. In the immediate aftermath of the bomb exploding, Batman heads to the dump to rally the ‘Sons of the Batman’ to his cause of returning order to Gotham. As he summons this figurative army of the underclass, Batman directly references Judge Dredd yelling: ‘Tonight, **we** are the law... **I** am the law’ (p. 173 - the second sentence is Dredd’s catch phrase – emphasis Miller’s). The implications of invoking *2000AD*’s satirical fascist law maker are misleading, despite the obvious tribute to the magazine. While Dredd may call upon the support of various citizens groups occasionally, his normal response is to brutally suppress such uprisings with extreme force supported by other judges. Here something quite different is happening in that Batman is gathering the very people he had previously suppressed.

After enlisting his imitators he gathers the remnants of the Mutant as they escape from jail by means of a simple ‘appeal to [their] community spirit’ (p. 176). What seems like a flippant comment acquires different connotations when, as we have seen, community

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spirit is the one thing Gotham (and indeed) America, from its president down, seems to have abandoned. The new police commissioner Yindel, seeing the Mutants capitulate, calls off her men despite, it is implied, having a clear shot at Batman, stating ‘No. No. He’s too big’ (p. 176).

What is happening here is that Batman is forming an alternate source of law and social authority in the moment of a crisis. Far from being a fascist moment, in the context of the emergent class relations this appears more of a kind of opportunistic, revolutionary Marxism. While the crisis passes and the status quo is briefly restored after the event, Batman’s view of the political make up of Gotham is changed. He then proceeds to fake his own death with the help of a radical Oliver Queen (aka Green Arrow, a Robin Hood inspired superhero) in a battle with Superman who has been told by Reagan to deal with this new threat to the government’s authority. This death shears him of his Bruce Wayne persona and the social trappings of wealth and leaves him hiding out in underground caves with an army of Mutants plotting his return to the surface:

Years to train and study and plan... here in the endless cave, far past the blunt remnants of a crime fighter whose time has passed... It begins here – an army – to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers... This will be a good life... good enough. (p. 199)

So Batman becomes a Lenin for the MTV era and plots and plans for the revolution with his vanguard of radical youth hidden away from the authorities. ‘A revolution is “made” *directly* by a minority’ says Trotsky, summarising precisely Batman’s plan.³⁴³ But who are these people ‘worse than thieves and murderers’ that the Caped Crusader seems to think he must overthrow?

³⁴³ Leon Trotsky ‘Hue and Cry over Kronstadt’ *The New International* Vol. 4 No. 4 (1938) available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/01/kronstadt.htm> last accessed 27 April 2010

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Figures 32 and 33 show two pages of reflection on the chaos in Gotham following the Soviet bomb. In them we find ourselves in the middles of the accounts of four bystanders: a priest, a nurse, a journalist and a bald white man in a suit. The page background is changed to black to emphasise the gravity of the situation. Only the nurse is presented in a positive light: she is immediately aware of the dangers and is quick acting enough to save the journalist from an explosion. The other characters, all act selfishly and violently, with varying degrees of contrition after the event. In an effective use of the sixteen panel grid, we see individual testimonials from the characters juxtaposed with “silent” panels showing the actual events. The journalist in the neck brace and the bald man provide the interesting insight into a damning critique of the middle classes.

First to note is the journalist’s casual racism: he refers to a woman who dies in the same explosion, which he only escaped due to the reactions of the nurse, as a ‘Jap bitch’; then when he murders another looter he justifies it with ‘he was black – I’m no racist but I thought he might have a knife. I did what anybody would’ve’. An amazing level of self-entitlement is married to a very specific sense of who this ‘anybody’ is. Despite the fact that the commentary on class is now explicit, race is still embedded as a location of difference in the discourse. This is the manner in which Miller ends up presenting a class struggle in terms that need to be signified through racism to have full impact within an American context. This inability to focus on class without reference to race is produced by the way American culture is infused with the collective trauma of a history of slavery that makes it impossible to express a class conflict contextually without referring back to that narrative of racial oppression. It is in such a way that the comic seems to present Batman engaging in a Marxist revolutionary struggle without its author being self-consciously

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aware that this is what his text is doing: class conflict is necessarily subsumed as part of a struggle for equal rights on other terms.

Nevertheless, the sequence in figures 32 and 33 has an attack on neoliberalism as a middle class ideology at its core. The looters that form the mobs fighting over food are presented as ruthless in their attempt to acquire what they identify as the most valuable commodity. The journalist knocks the priest out with the butt of his gun as the priest tries to take it from him stating: 'It was the end of the world and I had a gun -- wouldn't take a genius to realise the only other thing worth a damn was food.' This self serving attitude is a metaphor for the acquisitive mode of the wider society: far from a barbarism in a *Lord of the Flies* mode, what emerges is reflective of the moral logic of the society we have seen so far – it is the telos of Reaganism.³⁴⁴ The journalist acquires the gun that is a marker of status and uses it to marshal support by force and seize goods from others with a similar idea. Both sides 'want it all for themselves'. As the bald man states: 'There was no excuse for what we did. We weren't just crazy. We were an ugly bunch of stupid, selfish bastards.'

This stands in stark contrast to the two other ways of dealing with instant social collapse. While Batman organises his "revolutionaries" and restores order, the former Commissioner Gordon organises the working class community around his tenement block to fight fires, tend the wounded and distribute supplies (pp. 170-184). Thus a clear disparity in response emerges illustrating two responses to adversity characterised by class differences. In the process Batman becomes perceived as a class warrior and it is without

³⁴⁴ William Golding *The Lord of the Flies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954)

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compulsion that Reagan, formerly reluctant to get involved, sicks his attack dog Superman upon this new found ideological threat.³⁴⁵

Reagan's implied analysis is closer than Miller's. If instead of fascism or Bolshevism, it could be argued that Batman is instead presenting some sort of anarchic sensibility in his politics – suggested by Miller in his suggestion that the politics are autonomist – consider the quotation below from Trotsky and think about Batman and his army hiding from government and media in the warrens under Gotham and their eventual aims:

Of course, this would be a very “pleasant” dictatorship... Anarchists, who are really liberal pedagogues, hope that in a hundred or a thousand years the toilers will have attained so high a level of development that coercion will prove unnecessary. Naturally, if capitalism could lead to such a development, there would be no reason for overthrowing capitalism. There would be no need either for violent revolution or for the dictatorship which is an inevitable consequence of revolutionary victory. However, the decaying capitalism of our day leaves little room for humanitarian-pacifist illusions.³⁴⁶

What we see in *TDKR* is an awareness of class entering an American radical political discourse. This, along with some of the techniques for communicating it, has come through the British movement that started on *2000AD*. Yet the revolutionary tenor of Miller's Batman is something quite different. It seems to be the result of confronting the self-evidence of a fundamental wrong: the exclusion of a group of people, essentially those on lower incomes, from Rancière's 'distribution of the sensible'.³⁴⁷ Yet unlike the resignation found in *Halo Jones* or the pastiche sensibilities of 'Play It Again Sam', Miller finds a

³⁴⁵ We learn from the news that due to Batman's actions, it is only in Gotham that order was restored without huge bloodshed. The irony is that because Batman achieves by consensus what the government cannot achieve by force, he becomes too big a threat. See p. 186

³⁴⁶ Trotsky op cit

³⁴⁷ See introduction.

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response to this inequality in Batman's conversion to violent revolution. While the obvious comparison is Moore's anarchist allegory: Batman lacks the explicit ideological positioning of *V for Vendetta*.

Neither Miller, nor Batman are consciously embracing the politics that emerge from the ending and nor, to be clear, am I advocating such a politics. Nevertheless, in the combination of the media, the Mutants and the class critique that *TDKR* presents we see a sophisticated response to the cultural politics of the time. Lacking a developed class politics to contextualise the similarities of the ending to an insurgent communism, Miller's Batman falls into a response to a difficult situation that is, taken as a whole, profoundly undemocratic. But the critique of the media and celebrity culture in the comic produces its opposite: it is framed around a belief in community and collective good that seems sadly lacking in the wider American society that Miller is parodying. Batman at the end of the comic is the catalyst by which that collective response emerges in Gotham. In such a scenario, perhaps Lenin is not the most appropriate revolutionary comparison, but instead through the way Batman fakes his death to rise anew we can see him subverting the emerging rules of celebrity to suggest a figure closer in time and space to the comic than the father of Russian communism. As Little suggests:

The most obvious contemporary model of 'democratic' celebrity is probably the 'leader' of the Zapatistas in Mexico, Subcommandante Marcos. Masked and anonymous, this is a celebrity who everyone and anyone can claim to be, as no-one knows who he 'really' is.

While the publication date would mean that Marcos could not have been an influence, direct or indirect, we can see how the Batman icon could be appropriated by others (as

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indeed it has throughout the comic) in such a fashion at the end of the comic. Usefully,

Littler offers an inspiration for Marcos that may be more chronologically appropriate:

This is a self-consciously dissolved model of celebrity in which Marcos is everyone, sharing the fame like that other model of celebrity where celebrity is dissolved into the populace, *Spartacus*.³⁴⁸

Would “I am Batman” be an appropriate rallying cry for the dispossessed? Could Reagan have been brought down by an army of comics fan demanding class war? Probably not, but it is a great fantasy for a moment or two.

³⁴⁸ Littler op cit p. 17

Chapter 8: Conclusion – Anglo-American Comics Today and the Politics of the *2000AD* Group of British Creators

The comics discussed in this thesis are examples of a medium exploring the space which opened up when censorship was rolled back. Unlike the underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s, the *2000AD* group of creators operated initially within the boundaries of existing conventions, but rapidly their desire to have their comics interrogate the world around them came to mean changes not just in the kinds of narrative they pursued but in the structure of those narratives. Key amongst these changes was the shift in how they addressed their readership. Gone was “the zero-degree” reader that Tintin was seen to represent and in his white, middle class place, more complex ways of structuring the reader’s position within a narrative emerged. As we have seen in chapters 4 through 7, these positions were often female, often working class, sometimes gay and they often worked in ways that were more than tokenistic expressions of multi-culturalism or an attempt to present an awareness of class or diversity. There was a deliberate attempt to present the perspectives of a far wider range of world views than had previously been the norm in mainstream comic books. When creators stopped producing comics as if they had to appeal exclusively to their readers as white, male teenagers, a complex shift in the politics of the medium occurred.

If politics operates from the ‘assumption of equality between any and every speaking being’ as Rancière puts it, that equality can only be asserted on a mass scale in

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representation whether democratic, legal or cultural.³⁴⁹ The comics of the *2000AD* group and their successors are political in this manner. They broke the conventions of imaginary identification in the Tintin mould, challenging the very idea of who was reading the comics and the kinds of representation that played into the dominant structures that Tintin represented. More often, as we saw in *V for Vendetta* and *Swamp Thing*, they pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable in a comic at all. This is a comic book version of Rancière's 'disincorporation' (see Introduction); the protagonists structure a relationship to the rest of the world that confronts its basic systems of organisation.

To do this a simplistic positioning of the reader through a single "neutral" protagonist was insufficient, so creators opted to structure their comics in different ways either between two characters moderating the experience of the fictitious world or through a context that embeds the narrative in a social critique. In the first instance, instead of a reader embodied and coded in terms of class, race, gender and sexuality in the manner of Tintin the reader is 'disincorporated' in the space between Evey and V or perhaps more powerfully in the merging of Abby and Swamp Thing. In the second, we saw the emergence of a female protagonist navigating a complex science fiction critique of Thatcher's Britain in *Halo Jones* and the use of a superheroic icon like Batman to explore issues of class in a brutal parody of 1980s America. In both these cases, established genre roles for protagonists were reinvented and their location within political-social structures inverted.

As a whole, these changes represent the opening up of mainstream comics not just to social commentary and reflection upon cultural change, but to "real" politics as Rancière

³⁴⁹ Rancière op cit 1999 p. 30

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sets it out. In the early 1980s, comics became a medium where not only was a pernicious, inappropriate mode of censorship finally rendered irrelevant, but where the politics (or strictly lack thereof in Rancière's terms) of such censorship was exposed through the radical difference of what succeeded it in post Code comics. The process of politicisation of this one niche within the wider field of comics is just one example of how fiction can step beyond the dominant world view to challenge and test the foundations of its systems of representation.

There are limits however to what has been demonstrated in this thesis. What has been explored is one aspect of the period that, while representative of the selection, cannot encompass the totality of the movement addressed. Other texts standing outside my selection could offer readings that would undermine it. My decision to leave out *Judge Dredd*, for instance, was motivated partly by the inability of the argument presented here to deal with the problem of an ironic sensibility that sometimes becomes the thing it satirises.³⁵⁰ We saw a hint of this in the problematic positioning of Batman and the intrinsically undemocratic tenor of his response to politics. Likewise elements found within the relentless semiotic pastiche in *RoboHunter* could be seen to raise similar issues (although are more completely resolved by the end of 'Play It Again Sam' than they are in *TDKR*). While I acknowledge comics that bear more similarity to *Judge Dredd* than say *Swamp Thing*, exist both within British publishing of the time and the American mainstream, they do not fundamentally undermine the core argument here. Nevertheless, in retrospect, the decision to leave out *2000AD*'s most famous export (driven partly by length

³⁵⁰ From the perspective of audience analysis this becomes even more problematic – see Martin Barker 'Taking the Extreme Case: Understanding a fascist fan of Judge Dredd' in Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye and Imelda Wheelan *Trash Aesthetics* (London: Pluto Press, 1997) pp. 14-30

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constraints, but as much by it requiring a completely new strand to the argument) is unfortunate, and work on *Dredd* could undoubtedly strengthen or challenge the argument presented here. Likewise, I have indicated that other independent comics like *Cerebus*, *Concrete* or *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* could add another dimension to the thesis, as could tracing the origins of *2000AD* back into the underground comix scene of the 1960s and 1970s in more depth than offered in the occasional comments here.

Part of the rationale for leaving these things out is that the methodology of intense close analysis of specific texts (and indeed specific pages of texts) to produce a set of readings to support the central concern of the thesis is space and labour intensive. This means that any decision to include additional texts would have added substantively to the length of the document. Other emphasises would have been possible, but the one presented here covers in detail what a review of the comics of the time suggested were the most important moments in the trajectory of the argument. This methodological decision was important for the thesis as a whole as it enabled a look at the sort of minute textual operations that enabled the politics of the comics in question to take shape.

This ability to identify recurring techniques like direct reader address, the use of breakdown to emphasise parts of a comic's message or the shift from thought balloons to dialogue and interior monologues could only really be explored through close textual analysis. To those disappointed by the lack of audience analysis in a thesis looking explicitly at readers, suffice it to say that while such a methodology would have plenty to offer as a complement to what is presented here, it could not replace it. If these sorts of textual functions were to have their impact on readers measured, audience research would perhaps not be the best way to test their validity. Instead, methodologies coming from lab

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based cognitive psychology might be more appropriate, perhaps even methods building from the work done on perception and neuroscience using point-light walkers.³⁵¹ The specific use of such a research method is beyond my scientific knowledge, but the cross-over between theorising the sorts of operations that go into a comic where movement is assumed by the reader and research that looks into the cognitive processes that recognise movement is obvious.

The other issue that should be addressed at this stage is perhaps more of a cross disciplinary problem with close analysis as a methodology rather than an actual flaw. Humanities approaches, while still central to cultural studies as a discipline, are not subject to social science style considerations of methodology in the same way. For instance, a close reading is not replicable: any given critic will produce a different reading to another. This is not a negative aspect of the methodology; instead it is about different critics placing their readings in discourse with one another. A key example in this thesis would be my discussion of Geoff Klock's discussion of Batman in chapter 7. What I hope could be seen there was two critics coming at a text with different priorities, but through some areas of agreement and other areas of disagreement a stronger overall interpretation was produced. This is the dialectic of criticism that has been running for centuries and is central to all humanities approaches. It does not produce positivistic results, but is the mode by which certain types of knowledge develop.

Still, such an approach has been under fire for decades for its lack of "scientific" reliability, even from within disciplines that make use of it. Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of*

³⁵¹ See review article by Jean Decety and Julie Grèzes 'Neural Mechanisms Subservicing the Perception of Human Actions' *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* – Vol. 3, No. 5, (Kidlington: Oxford, 1999) pp. 172-178

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Criticism, one of the key historical works in English literature that addresses these issues, asserts in the face of this challenge that: ‘A public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalises the arts and loses its cultural memory.’³⁵² Moreover despite the lack of positivistic results Frye claims that the critical analysis of texts *is* scientific, but perhaps in a way that would not be comparable to work done in a field that works on the basis of replicable testing of hypotheses: ‘Evidence is examined scientifically; previous authorities are used scientifically; fields are investigated scientifically; texts are edited scientifically.’ Moreover he also acknowledges that despite this the language of science may not be considered apt by some, stating: ‘if there are any readers for whom the word “scientific” conveys emotional overtones of unimaginative barbarism, they may substitute “systematic” or “progressive” instead.’³⁵³

As a whole these comments of Frye’s constitute a defence of the method here with which I agree. Perhaps slightly unusually for someone studying this field, I did not come to the subject of comic books with a life-long passion for the medium stretching back to early childhood. Quite the contrary, until I was in my early twenties I held the medium in a similar regard as many of its most brutalising, snobbish critics. What happened in the journey to completing the thesis you have just read, was precisely a passage through a personal discovery of the power, ingenuity and potential of the medium. What started as a fascination with what seemed a strange and idiosyncratic mode of communication that could not be adequately described by the critical, culture and literary theory I had been reading as part of my education before the PhD, became a recognition of the direct

³⁵² Frye op cit p. 4

³⁵³ Ibid pp. 7-8

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contribution of comics to a radical sub-stream in popular culture that seemed to not have been properly addressed through its most visible movement, the influx of British creators to mainstream American comic culture. As such the work presented here may not comfortably fit the concept of “scientific”, but the process was certainly systematic and progressive. It represents a personal intellectual journey through a medium that started from a less than foundational knowledge; through an exploration of the textual functioning of the medium; to its history, a chronology spanning censorship, subversion, dazzling brilliance and crass commercialism; and finally to the specific period dealt with here that had stood out during that research process and to which I hope my work has done some little justice and enabled readers to look at again with a different sense of its importance and complexity.³⁵⁴

In doing so, the focus on the texts themselves has, I hope, enabled me to maintain the integrity of the comics as other readers will discover them. It has also meant that despite strong views on a number of questions and approaches within critical theory, I hope that this process has enabled me to avoid imposing them on the texts themselves too much. Frye warn of the perils of imposing a pre-fabricated theoretical lens on texts: ‘To subordinate criticism to an externally derived critical attitude is to exaggerate the values in literature that can be related to the external source, whatever it is.’³⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the analysis conducted and choice of texts could never be entirely impartial and while I have attempted to use political and cultural theory roughly contemporary to the period (Hall, Hebdige etc.), or reflective of it; that theory has tended to

³⁵⁴ This process also means that the early phases of my research are perhaps not really reflected in the final outcome of the written thesis. There were various different phases within this exploration of the comics medium that did not fit within the final argument presented here. Some of this work is reflected in the bibliography for completeness sake.

³⁵⁵ Ibid p.7

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be within a cultural studies tradition of the left. Whether this undermines the value of thesis is up to the reader to decide and will probably be made on the basis of their own political views and scholarly values.

In the final analysis it must be said that the claims of the readings presented here and their politics are partial; the comics industry remains dominated by white, male professionals espousing a predominantly middle class viewpoint. Enormous changes have shaken the industry since the 1970s in a wide variety of ways, but until the creators reflect the diversity not just of their readers, but of their characters there will still be a lot more progress to be made. Nearly thirty years on from the publication of most of the works discussed in this thesis, we can see how the movement discussed here has had its role to play in the development and continued survival of what may seem to outsiders as a curious and marginal medium. The industry is now more diverse in terms of types of content and modes of distribution, overlap and cross publishing amongst different national and regional industries is more common and comics are starting to find a wider audience and a more recognised place within culture as a whole.

At the “big two” publishers, British writers in the *2000AD* tradition are among some of their most celebrated stars. Working most often with fellow Scot Brian Hitch, Mark Millar has made his name by writing uncompromising “adult” takes on popular Marvel characters. At DC Comics, Grant Morrison, who made his name in the USA on the surreal post-modern *Animal Man* (see Chapter 3), is one of the companies most senior writers and is entrusted with the big Universe events (most recently *Final Crisis*) that redefine the

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company's core properties on a semi-regular basis.³⁵⁶ Like most "name" British comics writers both worked for *2000AD* in their early careers.

In most comic shops, superheroes still dominate, but there are increasingly large sections dedicated to independent or alternative comics, foreign language comics and comic book tie-ins with other media franchises. Among these independent and alternative comics is a section inspired largely by the *2000AD* group of creators. Long dominated by the Vertigo "for mature readers" imprint of DC Comics, this publishing sub-set would also include the WildStorm imprint (also DC, but originally an independent), Image comics, Icon (owned by Marvel) and more. The comics produced by these imprints and independent companies are becoming increasingly popular, not just in terms of fan followings but also with Hollywood producers. Indeed Mark Millar's personal projects tend to metamorphose into film scripts before the ink is dry on the Bristol board of the comics page. The recent film *Wanted* was a toned down version of Millar's brutal morality tale of the same name published by Top Cow Comics (2003-2005); the *Hell Boy* series of films are adaptations of Mike Mignola's long running comic that draws on folk lore and fascism published by Dark Horse; and finally released after years of wrangling is the film version of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen*.³⁵⁷

The Hollywood embrace of these kinds of comics signifies that, like the more conventional superheroes, the kinds of narrative popularised by the group of creators around *2000AD* have entered the popular consciousness in a major way. This sub-set of

³⁵⁶ The "Event" comic series is another comics institution founded in the 1980s with the DC Universe *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series. See Ben Little op cit 2004 for more on this. Grant Morrison (w) J. G. Jones (a) *Final Crisis* (New York: DC Comics, 2009)

³⁵⁷ Tim Bekmambetov (dir.) *Wanted* (Universal, 2008); Guillermo del Toro (dir.) *Hell Boy* (Revolution Studios, 2004); Guillermo del Toro (dir.) *Hell Boy II: The Golden Army* (Dark Horse Entertainment, 2008); Jack Snyder (dir.) *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009)

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comics started as a niche carved out to enable writers and artists, primarily from 2000AD, to escape from censorship of political content. However, as the last three decades progressed, it expanded to include American creators interested in producing similarly themed works within the various genres of the fantastic (including superheroes). In essence, this distinct area of comics production has become the “radical” side of mainstream comics culture

The body of work produced by these creators, in what has become a genre as much as a movement, is by no means homogenous. It is a heterogeneous mix of narrative approaches to and relationships with both the wider body of comic books and the cultural politics of the last 30 years. Key texts like *Swamp Thing*, or *Batman: Dark Knight Returns* produced socio-political commentaries firmly embedded within the superhero genre but with as much of an eye on critiquing that genre as on the political shifts of the 1980s. Later examples such as Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles*, Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon’s *Preacher* or Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson’s *Transmetropolitan* moved largely away from superheroes to place their emphasis elsewhere: respectively class and queer culture, religion, and the relationship between politics and journalism.³⁵⁸ Thus comics by British creators in the early 1980s were enormously important for the medium as a whole. They enabled not just new voices to be imagined in the comics, but new ways for them to be heard and new frameworks for representation. One significant consequence of doing these things within the context of mainstream comics publishing is that now new creators coming

³⁵⁸ Alan Moore (w), Dave Gibbons (a) *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Grant Morrison (w) Various (a) *The Invisibles* (New York: DC Comics 1994-2000); Garth Ennis (w), Steve Dillon (a) *Preacher* (New York: DC Comics, 1995-2000); Warren Ellis (w) Darick Robertson (a) *Transmetropolitan* (New York: DC Comics, 1997-2002)

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to the field, from whatever background it may be, have a solid foundation for creating genuinely political comics for a wide audience.

Figures

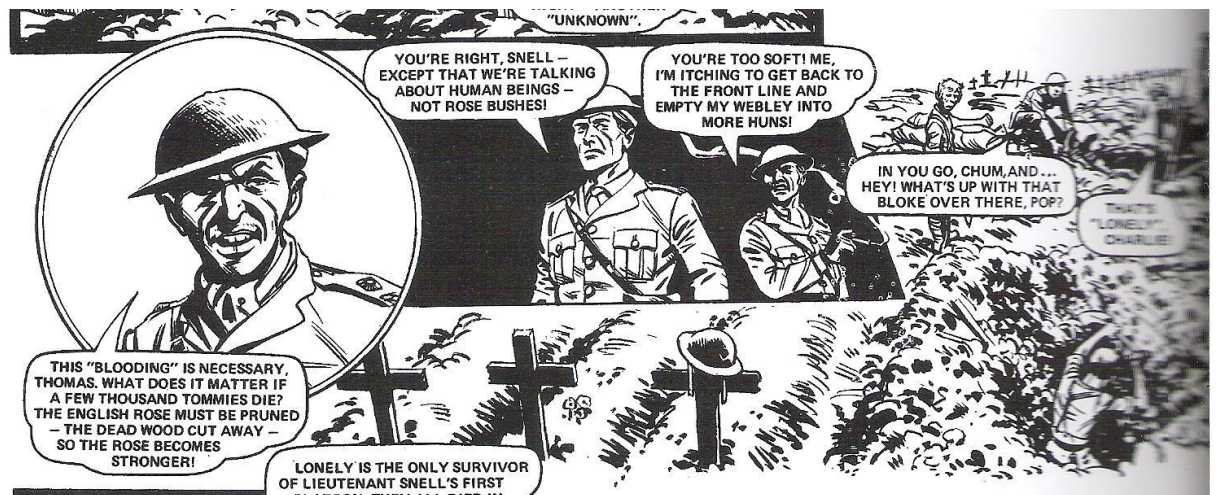


Figure 1: Middle class Lieutenant Snell from Pat Mills (w) and Joe Colquhoun (a) *Charley's War: 2 June 1916-1 August 1916* (London: Titan, 2001: 1979-1981) not paginated

Figure 2: Winsor McCay 'Little Nemo in Slumberland' 3rd December 1905. From John Canemaker *Winsor McCay: His Life and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005) p. 6

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Figure 3: Lynd Ward *God's Man* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004:1929) pp. 26-29

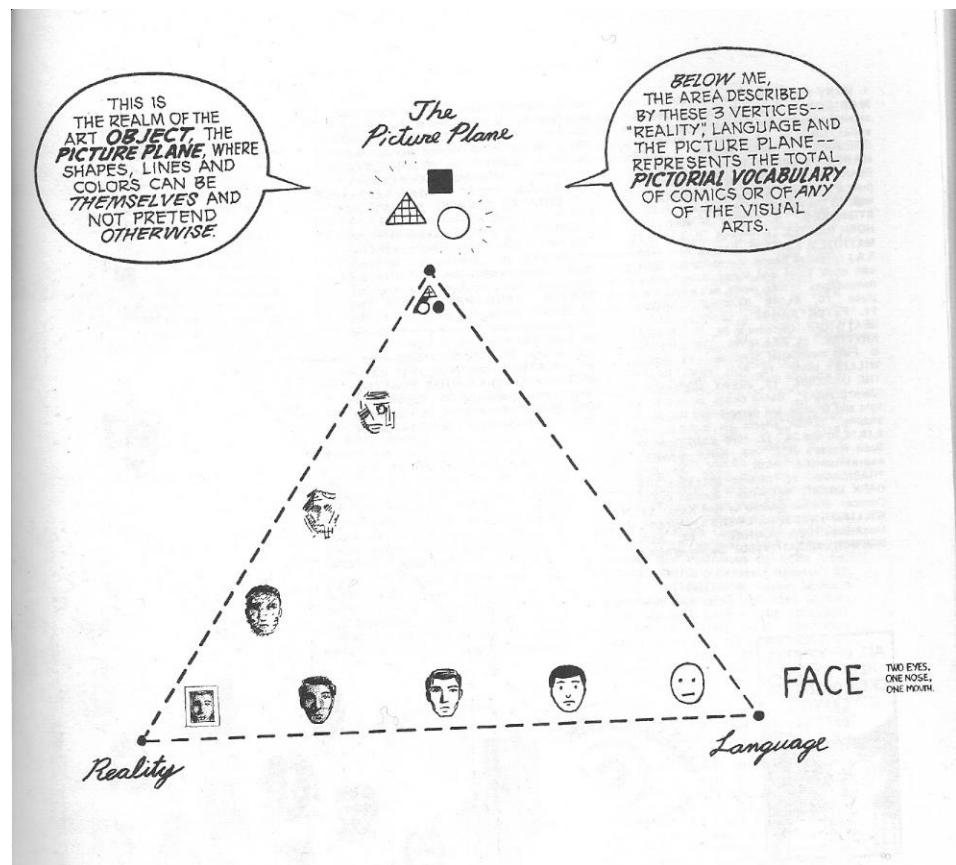


Figure 4: Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 1993) p. 51



Figure 5: Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 1993) p. 42



Figure 6: Hergé *Tintin: The Castafiore Emerald* trans. Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner (London: Mammoth, 1973) p. 4



Figure 7: From *Ivan The Terrible* Dir. Sergei Eisenstein (Alma Ata Studi, 1944) taken from Roland Barthes *Image Music Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977)



Figure 8: Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 1993) p. 66



Figure 9: Grant Morrison (w), Chas Truog (a) *Animal Man: Deus Ex-Machina* (New York: DC/Vertigo 1989) pp. 40-41



Figure 10: Iron Aggie at the start of 'Play it Again Sam' from John Wagner and Alan Grant (w), Ian Gibson (a) *RoboHunter: Play it Again Sam* (Oxford: Rebellion 2005: 1982-3) not paginated



Figure 11: The Human League from 'Play it Again Sam' from John Wagner and Alan Grant (w), Ian Gibson (a) *RoboHunter: Play it Again Sam* (Oxford: Rebellion 2005: 1982-3) not paginated



Figure 12: The Human League from 'Play it Again Sam' from John Wagner and Alan Grant (w), Ian Gibson (a) *RoboHunter: Play it Again Sam* (Oxford: Rebellion 2005: 1982-3) not paginated



Figure 13: Concentration Camp from 'Play it Again Sam' from John Wagner and Alan Grant (w), Ian Gibson (a) *RoboHunter: Play it Again Sam* (Oxford: Rebellion 2005: 1982-3) not paginated



Figure 14: Hoop Life from Alan Moore (w), Ian Gibson (a) *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2005) p. 2



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Figure 18: Toy Molto's confession from Alan Moore (w), Ian Gibson (a) *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2005) p. 145



Figure 19: V destroys The Houses of Parliament from Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a) *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1990) p. 14



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Figure 21: Rosemary Almond assassinates Adam Susan from Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a) *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1990) p. 235



Figure 22: Detective Finch shoots V from Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a) *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1990) p. 236



Figure 23: Stan Lee (w) Gil Kane and John Romita (a) *The Amazing Spider-Man* Issue 96 May 1971 (New York: Marvel Comics) not paginated



Figure 24: The Dark Phoenix fights Storm and Beast from Chris Claremont (w) John Byrne (a) *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006) p. 140



Figure 25: Daredevil beset by Assassins from Frank Miller *Daredevil Visionaries: Frank Miller Volume 2* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2001) no pagination



Figure 26: Abby's nightmare from Alan Moore (w) Steve Bissette and John Totleben, (a) *Swamp Thing: Love and Death* (New York: DC Comic, 1990) p. 51

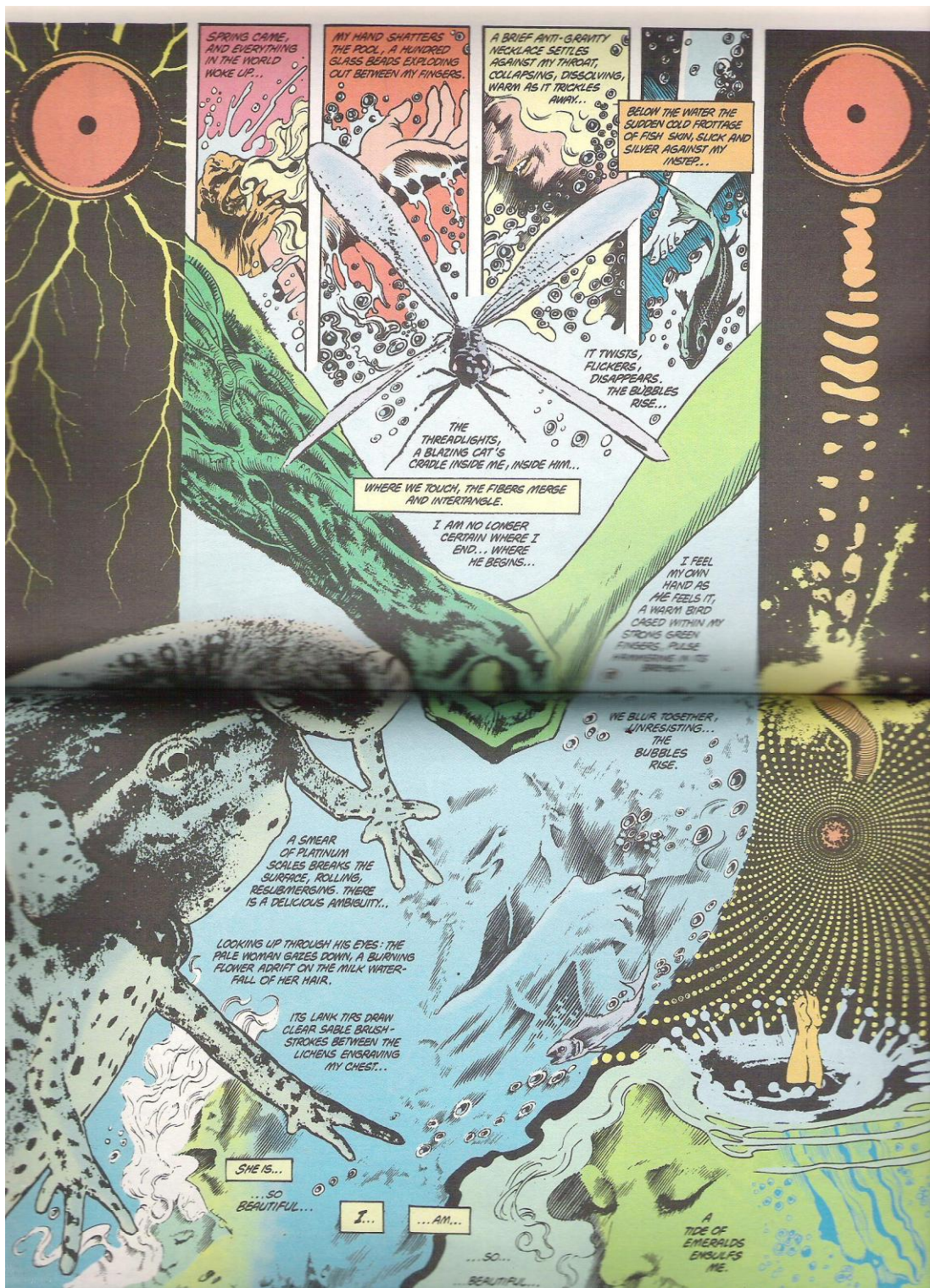


Figure 27: Abby and Swamp Thing being intimate from Alan Moore (w) Steve Bissette and John Totleben, (a) *Swamp Thing: Love and Death* (New York: DC Comic, 1990) pp. 198-199

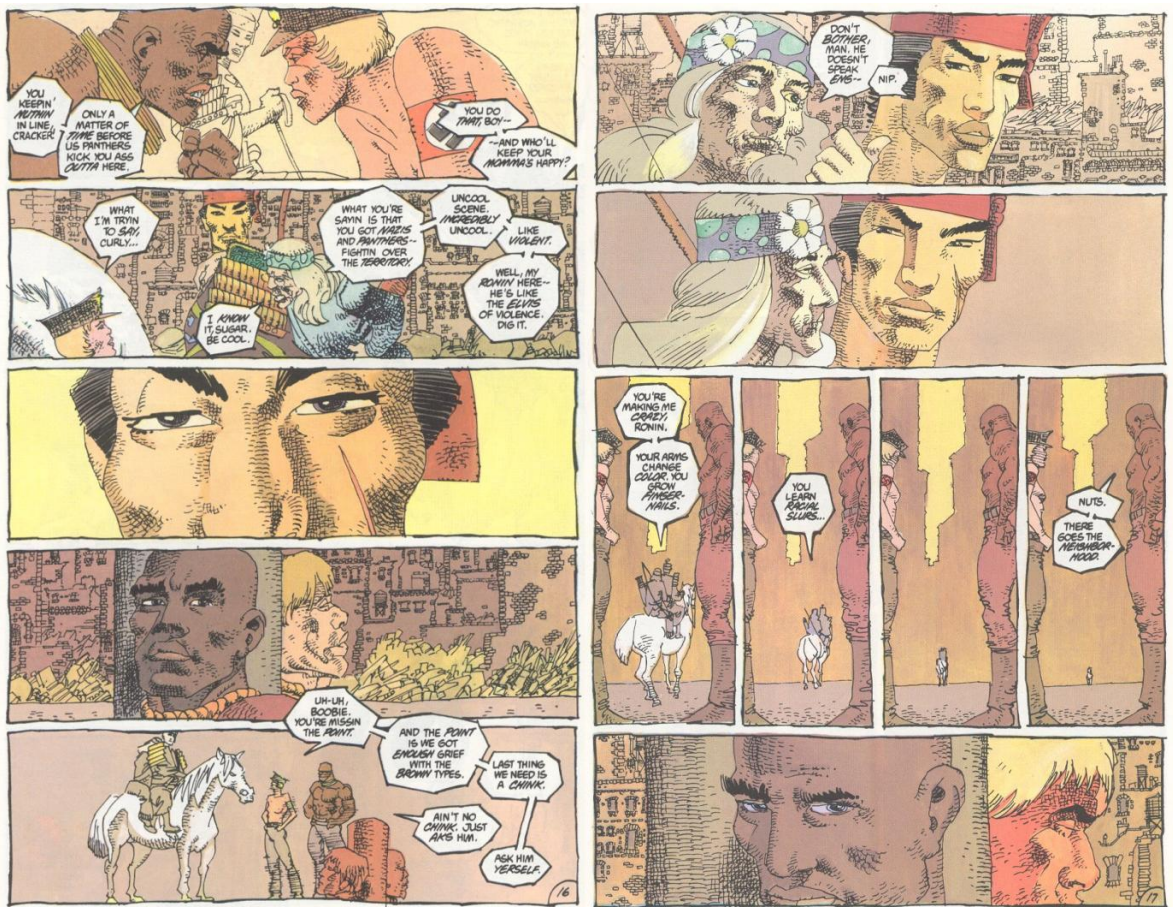


Figure 28: Racist sacrifice in Frank Miller's *Ronin* # 3 (New York: DC Comics, 1983) pp.16-17



Figure 29: Bruce Wayne accosted from Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) p. 13

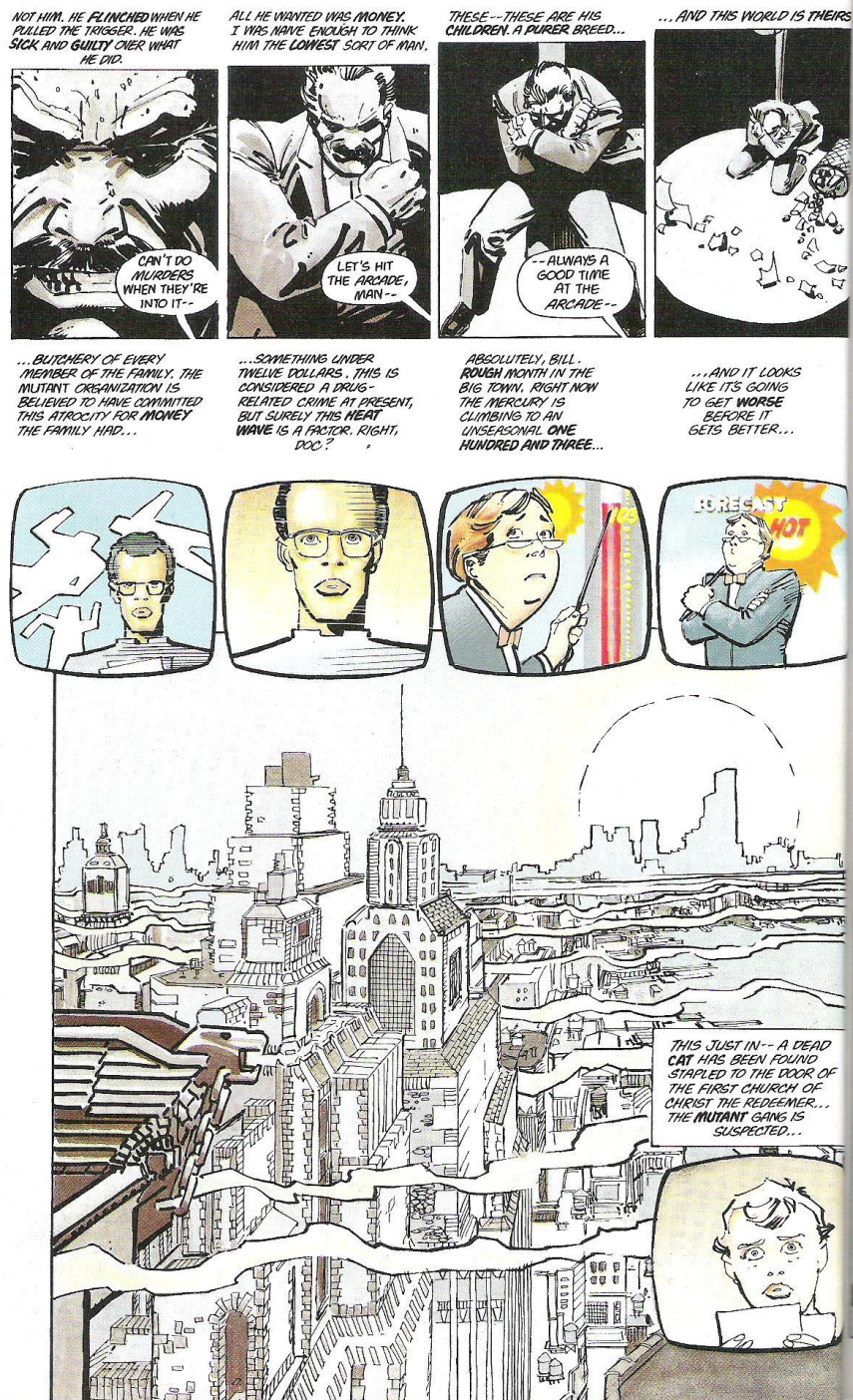


Figure 30: Bruce Wayne accosted continued from Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) p.14

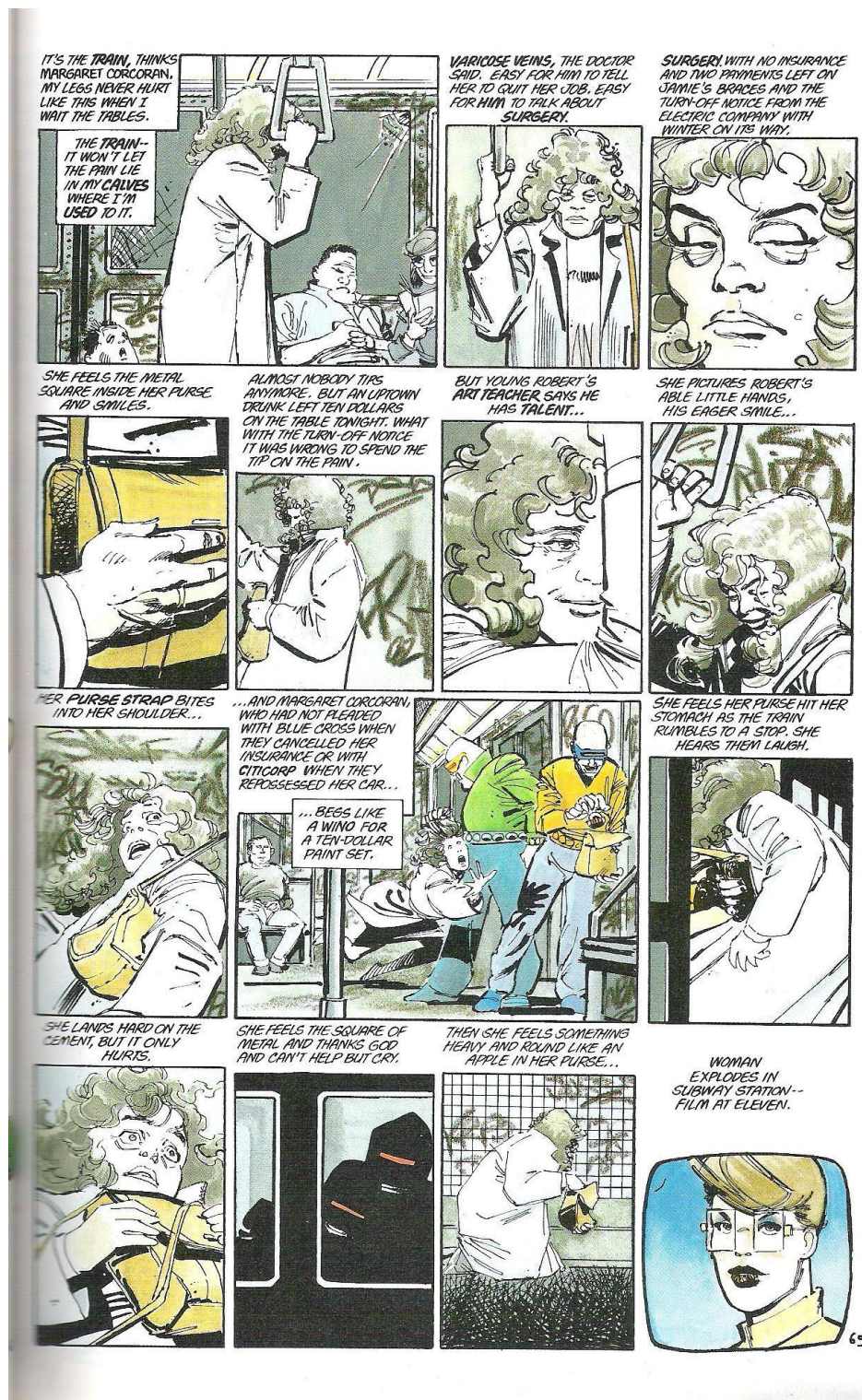


Figure 31: The murder of Margaret Corcoran from Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) p.69

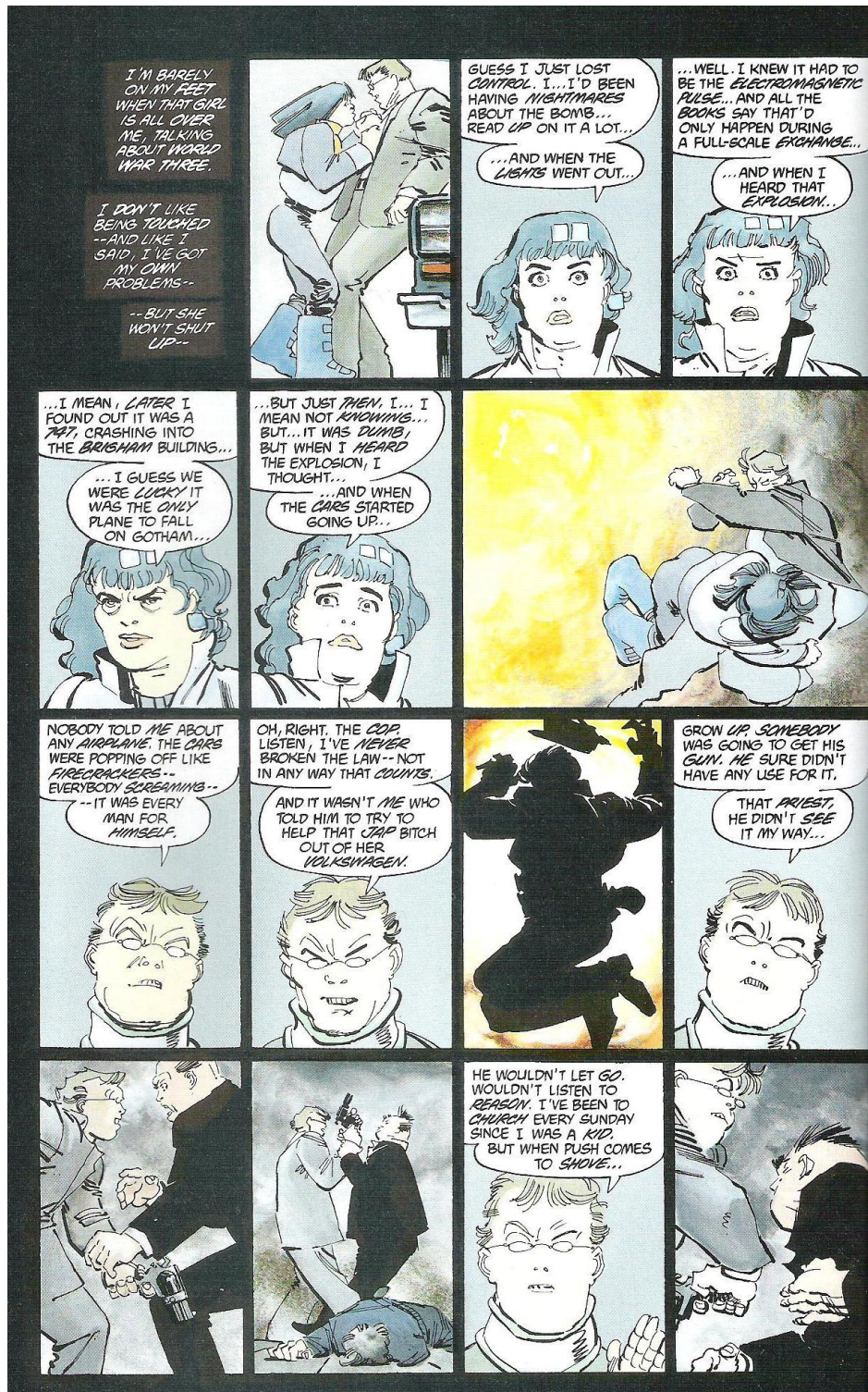


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Figure 33: The middle class riots from Frank Miller *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002) p. 181

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